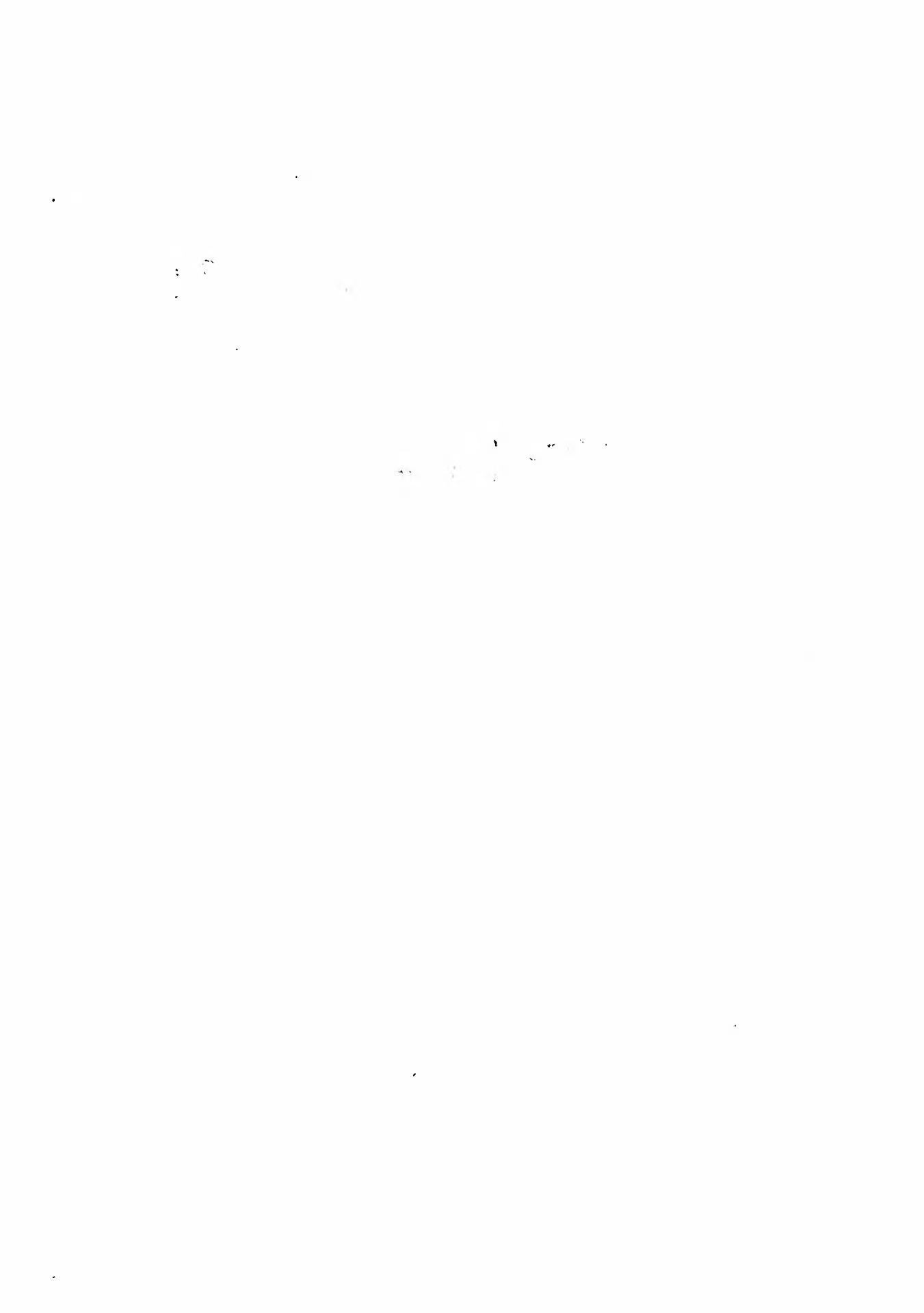


THE CENTAURIANS

*BIAGI*

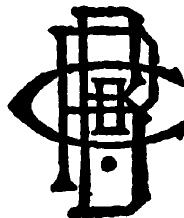






*The*  
**CENTAURIANS**  
**A NOVEL**

BY  
**BIAGI**



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# “The Centaurians.”

## CHAPTER I.

Twelve long years of European travel had failed to stale the beauties of my own country. I compared the exquisite, restful view, to the garish expansiveness of foreign panorama. Though fagged and frayed with experience it was a tingling delight to gaze once again upon this fair, smiling, home country, whose mountain-lined distance of vivid heliotrope formed superb contrast to waving fields of deep yellow corn.

I flung aside the book I was reading with its repellent thoughts; the dewy freshness of a bright July morning weaned me from poppy-drugged ideas. I faltered at the grand finale of this wonderful collection of moods and wandered out in the glorious sunshine and fields beyond. Upon a huge mound of hay I lolled, enjoying the delicate fragrance of roses mingled with the heavy, pungent scent of carnations, and lazily watched blue butterflies flitting above, while black field reptiles ventured close, wondering what species I might be, then vanishing at the least movement. The hum of insects seemingly swelled to the city's roar; all nature was active with industry, I alone was the

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drone, though master of this rural, enchanting, warm, lazy scene, which, like a veil, spread over the vast area of my possessions.

Powerfully wealthy, I gloat in enjoyment and exist merely to squander the fabulous riches inherited from ancestors who worshipped at the shrine of Accumulation, that I, the culminating period, should revel in Profligacy. Value has no significance and to me there is naught under the blue heavens that is priceless, except perhaps—a new experience. I came from a queer clan, we could date our premier back to the twelfth century; a Florentine dealer in precious stones, whose interesting history filled one of the documents handed to me when I reached the age of supposed discretion. Originality was our motto. All were gifted with keenness and enterprise, though dotted periodically with mania—just a dash, you understand, to aid personality and create distinction. Avarice was strongly developed, dulling fear forcing us to brave many perils, and we scorned the warning contained in the great chest of documents which even I failed to unseal. We had survived many disasters and twice narrowly escaped oblivion. We possessed a doubtful legend and closely guarded a buried tomb of foulness, yet with all our cunning two fools nearly snuffed the name out of existence during the fifteenth, and again at the close of the seventeenth century.

My thoughts often dwelt upon these afflicted kinsmen; both had been mad, of course, their chameleon brains merely reflected the brilliant glints

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of their rare collection of gems. One coveted the green light flaring in the crown of Isis, and early mastered the knowledge that all men perfect when they are too old to profit by it—anticipation is the nectar of realization. He was radiant in longing for the mystic green he could never possess, and existed in a daring dreamland that all men desire but never contemplate. His marvelous collection of emeralds formed the foundation of our almost fabulous wealth. It was a similar malady that afflicted the later kinsman, who closed his career with a rabidness that slanted a muddy shade consuming centuries of gigantic endeavor to clear. His madness lacked reverence, but keenness, determination proved talent had he not been abnormal. He conceived a frenzied desire to possess a famous jewel with a rich setting of superstition and priceless value. The cutting fascinated him, he jeered at warnings and made offers of purchase with a persistency equal his mania; when realizing the wealth of the world contained not the value of the stone he called it fate and stole the gem. Years later he was found murdered, horribly mutilated. Aware of the fate destined for him, he reasoned a life forfeited justly covered all debts—the stone was our property. He feared to trust it out of his keeping, however, and when the final, awful moment arrived, his insane cunning outwitted the assassins—he swallowed the stone. I have it sunk in a broad band of gold.

After the exploit of this fanatic we scattered over the world, and though our name suffered tor-

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turing abbreviation, we were easily traced by our wealth. Luck followed us in all undertakings, riches accumulated, but doubting the truth of the superstition surrounding the stone it is indisputable that from the date it entered our possession love departed. We were known as a cold, calculating, heartless people, with the doubtful intellect usually accompanying wealth. We purchased affection as we would any saleable bauble, and lived the life of indifference and final dislike the purchased article always brings. The curse was a short, loveless existence, crowned with intangible longings.

\* \* \* \* \*

I recollect very little of my parents, both having passed away during my infancy, but I am liberally supplied with relatives who are disagreeably vivid, treacherous, small, scheming, gifted with a keen eye for profit—just relatives.

It was a kind providence, chiefly law, that placed me under the protection of Middleton & Co., a trio of the ablest and shrewdest of lawyers. They sent me to college, where I passed some years, though really it was not necessary. The intellect of a millionaire is generally accredited heavy with metal, though when backed with distinction, a most desirable bric-a-brac. I early discovered nothing was expected of me except good-nature and generosity. The commonest attributes were denied me, and though of a sunny temperament, eventually I grew bitter, scorning the mercenary. To be constantly striving to force a measure above companionable appendage was a cruel trial. However, my college

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life was not so difficult when I crushed the romantic nobility of youth. I became resigned to my value and easily tolerated the adulation my wealth inspired. I was extravagantly generous and considered a rare good fellow, who gave rare good times. Occasionally I indulged in spasms of ambition, and when controlled by this feverish sensation, vowed to out-class the associates who imposed upon me. I had a vague idea of Fame, Worth gained through merit, not purchased. These attacks invariably visited me after an evening passed with Professor Saxlehner, the only individual in the wide world who understood me and honestly believed in my possession of brains, and who pronounced my name always with full entirety—Virgilius Salucci. Saxlehner was a man of brilliant mind, quiet, simple, seeking solitude and delving deep in all manner of mysteries.

My gold carried little weight with him, he was sincerely fond of me and consequently rated me soundly for all indiscretions, declaring I would regret wasting the best years of my life and deadening my vast talents—though he failed to state in what particular line my genius lay, I believed him. Frequently I sought him, weary and in need of sympathy, but he regularly refrained giving any, telling me I was simply suffering the dissatisfaction of inferior association and he could not understand my persistence in such a course. He begged me to cultivate seriousness and avoid flattering clowns, frivolity was altogether out of my line, I was born for greater, higher things.

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Young and fond of pleasure, I ignored most of his advice, yet his words vividly impressed me, and in after years, profiting by his counsel, I became known as a man of many ideas, a trifle eccentric, and notoriously willing to fling away a fortune for a new experience. Saxlehner and I became great friends, yet with the ending of my college days we drifted apart. I plunged into the social gayety that awaits all rich young men, and learned more in one month of idleness than in all the years passed at college. I became wild, fast, yet deceived all with assumed unsophisticatedness and was a great trial to Middleton & Co., who kept a sharp lookout for squalls, remonstrating and warning me of disasters they could not steer me out of. Maliciously I parried with them, while debauchery fostered ennui and the dormant characteristics of my people roused to activity impregnating my system with the pessimist's germ. Much encountered subtlety and unscrupulousness ceased causing anxiety. I developed an impenetrable armor of caution and sought diversion in heartless analysis—the world is money-mad. Lovelessness, the curse of my people, was upon me. It caused no unhappiness, we had all lived through it, but I alone discovered and realized—it developed with mature reason, we were not born with it. Vaguely I dreamed of congeniality and calm affection but craved neither, and anything deeper seemed annoying. I was incapable of passion, consequently could not inspire it. Iron against all sensations, my callousness astounded even me. I scorned the temptations other men embraced. Con-

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tact with the world robbed me of all romance. I lived my life in a few months. In demeanor I was simplicity itself, jovial, gullible as ever, but where formerly I sought enjoyment I was now indifferent, content to bask in the supreme delight of proving my convictions correct. I never committed an error. Disinterestedness, gratitude, are chimeras. Through my reduced expenses Middleton & Co. figured, and honestly believed the gradual change meant matrimony; in no other way could they comprehend my sudden respectability. Middleton harped continually on the subject, Rollins made it the topic of conversation every time I visited his home, and Burke smiled suggestively, but refrained from remarks—he was not the orator of the firm.

As daughters did not ornament any of the three homes I became partially convinced of my duty, and following Middleton's advice began a series of inspection of my numerous cousins.

With the kind assistance of Rollins's wife (who believed herself too young for Rollins, but wasn't), I finally selected a tall, thin young woman, with rolling blue eyes, red cheeks, and rather pretty brown hair. Accustomed to quasi-fresh-wilted buds, I was attracted to the youth and apparent innocence of the girl. She was Carolyn, nineteen, with old age upon her at twenty-five. She was languid, insipid, and possessed the stereotyped conversation of nearly all girls of her age, who arrange their hair and dress all alike. She sang two songs in Italian, without knowing anything about it, and worried through four instrumental solos

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with murderous skill; also, she painted some, but Mamma gave it great importance and became a nuisance in her persistence that all should inspect the awful attempts, which were merely daubs even after the teacher had "gone over them." This was the extent of Carolyn's accomplishments, which opened preliminaries every time I ventured near her, and wise people versed in prediction aided by Mamma, had us married early in the skirmish. But Mamma was difficult, Carolyn impossible, and both possessed an omnivorous appetite for courtesy. Like boa-constrictors, they swallowed and swallowed and were always famished; and suddenly an unaccountable chill came upon me and I discovered the right was mine to live my own life. I could see no reason why I should burden myself with this great nonentity, this Carolyn, for the sole purpose of permitting her to inherit my wealth when she became my widow. It was an unnaturally cold conclusion and Middleton's pointedness became annoying. I advised him to get the matrimonial "bug" out of his head and quit bothering me. I did not regret Carolyn, but the affair was rather unfortunate, and she was young to be afflicted with the disappointment that all girls find so bitter and take so hard. Actuated by profound selfishness I renounced every inclination toward matrimony; martyr-like I vowed the lasciviousness of my race would end with me. I would live to squander this vast wealth and lead the ideal existence the poor imagine the wealthy enjoy. Possibly I would experience happiness, but in a superficial way, the in-

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tense I abhorred. Middleton & Co. were dumbfounded at my strange behavior, their consternation was rather interesting because unnecessary, but eventually the three kindly gentlemen greatly bored me, and to oust all unpleasant association I stated my long-contemplated intention of touring the world. No objections were offered. I was to send news regularly of my doings and the firm was to be notified at once should anything unusual occur.

Loaded with directions and accompanied by a trio of gay, young friends, I started out for adventure. Scarcely had we reached the old world, when I decided to get rid of my traveling companions. They were nice, jolly boys, restless for diversion and amusing because of their eternal appreciation of enjoyment, but I desired freedom, wishing to discover and cultivate any talents I might be gifted with, and to me it was unlimited opportunity, being in a strange land, surrounded by strangers. My three friends early discovered their pursuits were not mine; we parted without any ill-feeling. Then I proceeded to waste my time in a thousand ways, never accomplishing anything, yet perfectly sincere all the time, child-like in my own ambition, horribly cynical regarding others. I became known, of course, as a man of vast ideas, lacking the concentration that promotes success. I was constantly inspired with thoughts that rarely visit other people, but I kept my own counsel and encouraged the inventive ideas that assailed me. Eventually various learned people heard of me and my positive convictions and extended much courtesy while guiding

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me through all the intricate labyrinths that ever created stupefaction. Greatly encouraged and as happy as I ever expected to be, I became absorbed in that which three-fourths of the world are ever seeking and which the other fourth cannot comprehend—Fame.

Not hampered with advice from individuals who fancied themselves superior mortals, I entered upon heavy duties, much disappointment—which failed to affect me as I brought it upon myself—and many, many years of waste and vast expense. At one time I believed myself destined to become a famous inventor, but after repeated failures I realized the utter impossibility of my productions. However, I was encouraged to continue my “experiments,” being considered very promising, and it was the popular impression that in the general confusion I might hit upon something entirely original. I was energetic and deserved to. My inclinations were for work. I believed entirely in myself and continued ambitious till suddenly I developed a pet theory which came upon me unawares, yet took entire possession of my thoughts. For some time I worried along under this compelling influence, then suddenly, without regret, thrust aside inventive ambitions and with my usual determination to succeed entered a college of medicine. Undaunted by the years of study before me I grasped hopefully all problems labelled hazardous and avoided by others, and became an enthusiast when I discovered my theory a fact undreamed of. It was daring, yet I never faltered delving deep in the science that

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would create universal benefit, convince the sceptical, and perfect success. Finally came the day when knowledge forced me to propound my theory to the medical fraternity. An opportunity to demonstrate was all I asked. I was listened to and not exactly laughed at—that was the impression I made upon the learned gentlemen. All admired the suggestion, yet would give no encouragement. Frankly it was hinted that I was seeking fame, notoriety, not the advancement of science, yet the theory was feasible, though crude, a life-time problem, and—no one dared back me. Through all unfavorable criticism I retained my enthusiasm and sought opportunity. My startling theory received world-wide attention and I lectured all over Europe. When the opportunity presented itself I demonstrated my theory and—failed. The subject was the victim of a shocking accident and could not have lived. I prolonged his life five months. During that time he became the picture of health and progressed rapidly up to a certain degree, then science utterly failed to benefit. He never regained strength, was unable to walk, and if permitted to stand alone sank like pulp to the floor. The case interested and puzzled the whole medical clientele, the end was unexpected and astonishing.

“Your theory is nil, unnatural,” I was informed. “Nothing living has the power to survive the shock of test. The subject from the start is doomed to inward decay—you kill the strength nerves,” and I had “grasped a suggestion that only a master’s mind could complete.” Raw, immature, my great theory

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might be, but it was neither unnatural or impracticable; some bright, young student would master the science that I, through lack of ability for application (?) failed to perfect. Beneath the sun there is nothing new. The wonderful theory I dallied with had been in practice centuries ago and with many other valuable sciences had through disuse fallen out of existence.

The intellect of Time is degenerating with Earth. We grasp and marvel at that at which the ancient giant intellects simply nodded approval. Modernity is the reflection of miraculous originality of the early ages.

My career as a physician came abruptly to an end. I was wearied, and for the benefit of science would sacrifice nothing. That which had animated me now became an abomination. The profession of medicine had not scope enough to bring contentment or make me realize the vast ambition of pride. Vanity! vanity! vanity! I floated rudderless upon this cloudy lake and plunged into the huge, sulky, black waves of Disappointment, yet for an instant I gazed in the far distance—beautiful, enchanting, where the sun of Fame gilded the enticing pool of Success.

From my gigantic blunder I had the courage to extricate myself, renouncing the delights that absorb indolent others who declare the world an illusion and life an exertion. I donated large sums to various colleges to be expended in penetrating the mysterious science I failed in, then for years wandered over the world, aimless, melancholy, craving,

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ever searching the grand, supreme idea that I knew would reach me before peace.

India, that great field of abundant superstition, mildly restored my shattered energies. The occult science in its most malignant form attacked me. I was enchanted with fanatical proverbs tantalizing in their promise of what?—nothing.

I engaged a dwelling and furnished it up with barbaric splendor, then watched the subtle operations of the strange people I surrounded myself with. They possessed extraordinary imaginations and narrative powers, and, because it was impossible, I developed a keen desire to experience some of the delights these fanatics extolled.

Following instructions, I spent weeks in the mountains, inhaling dank vapors and camped in the wilderness, fasting for days, reading a book—for what purpose I never discovered—and ended it all as unimaginative as ever. I tried my utmost to become convinced of the supernatural, but never for an instant lost the knowledge I was an ass to so ardently pursue Folly, in her mock seriousness. I became shamed with the realization of the utter nonsense I permitted my intellect to roam in and the wild-eyed fanatics with their shrieks and convulsions and frenzied endeavors to convince, nauseated me when I discovered it was all acting, mere acting, and they were less sincere than I.

The fanaticism, immorality, the full rein given to sensualism and vulgar superstition disgusted me. Naught but undeveloped or diseased minds are convinced of such farces—an obnoxious weight upon

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civilization. My cold, calm, reasoning of the subject flashed clear, strong, like a vivid blaze of light, I stood alone but powerfully in the right. My ideas were ahead of my time, that was all. I suddenly ended my researches in the occult.

I became a worshipper of nature, and gloated in the sunset with its rare, rich coloring; in rapture I gazed upon the ocean with its tracery, lace-flecked waves and grand swell bursting in deep roar. I calmed my vision with the azure vaults above gradually deepening to a purple beyond imitation to be studded with billions and trillions of brilliant twinkling lights, then at the white, mysterious globe, sailing majestically alone; and finally at noontide, I worshipped the brazen, hot splendor of the Sun, and asked what was more awe-inspiring or worthy of devotion than this vast, beautiful Something, we call Nature. With joy I realized I alone had solved the mystery all were struggling to solve. Nature, divine, beautiful Nature, ruled the universe. Continually before us is laid this grand example in its chaste regulations which never offends, yet we the puny, tainted, little atoms, existing in this wonderful purity, continually offend all laws of Nature. If we formed our lives to compare with the vast splendor shining ever before us we would be divine. Eternity, the germ of imagination, soars to wonderful spheres, yet never reaches the sublime summit of the vast glory of the universe. And I still searched for the one great inspiration I knew I was destined for.

About this time I received urgent news from

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Middleton & Co. They demanded my return and conveyed the impression it was a matter of necessity, causing me to vaguely meditate upon the possibility if I had really reached the end of my powerful fortune. This was laughable, but Middleton & Co. had some strong reason—they always had strong reasons, and had entirely upset the rather flimsy plans I had formed for the future. I used some irritable language, though right down in my heart I had a hankering to see the old boys again.

Leisurely I journeyed homeward and tremendously enjoyed the trip across the ocean. The voyage was remarkably calm and I strode upon deck, inhaling great quantities of fresh, vigorous, salt air, and giving a passing glance at the class of people to whom I belonged, saw what is seen always among the rich and idle. Well-dressed self-satisfaction, without interest or idea beyond their own narrow little world; fashionable, complacent boredom, a certain well-bred discontent, idiotic, polite repartee, stifled yawns. . . . A kindly old gentleman interested me considerably. We were together constantly and I learned he had squandered three fortunes and enjoyed the superb satisfaction of regretting it. He had a wife and mature family somewhere and delighted in the thought that they had not the remotest idea of his whereabouts. I knew very well who he was, but did not allude to it as he traveled incognito and I feared to annoy him. He was an aristocrat—such men usually are. Our acquaintance ended with the voyage, but as we parted he gave me original, wholesome advice,

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which, like everything else, failed to impress me, though I stored it safely away in my memory.

"My young friend," he said, "you have traveled over a great portion of the globe and encountered a vast assortment of people, and to your astonishment discovered that good predominated. Everybody is good according to their idea of goodness—ahem! Am I not right? You see, I've studied you as you studied me. Salucci, cease to embitter your life with false views of yourself and others, you've entered the wrong track altogether; it is the man all admire, not the wealth which you permit to kill ambition. Interest yourself in financial problems, the most wonderful of all sciences. You're a born financier. God in heaven! what were the Fates up to that they bestowed upon you every faculty to amass riches, then supplied you with the fortune! What puppets we are! Last night you wished me luck, prosperity; and, Salucci, I wish you happiness. Good-bye."

I watched him hurrying away and almost fall into the arms of two dapper young men who were waiting for him. They had recognized him as I did and their object and interview. The old gentleman smiled genially upon them, but his amazement was comical when they addressed him—he looked politely embarrassed as though regretting he was not the party they were looking for, then shrugged his graceful old shoulders and quietly departed; and the two young men stared at each other, astounded that it was possible they had been trapped into a

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case of mistaken identity. I was glad we met, however, for he made an otherwise dull voyage extremely interesting.

It was a cold, misty morning when the pompous custom-house officials boarded the steamer. The fussy health officers were working themselves into a fret because some one in the steerage had a cold, and the decks were crowded with passengers, eager, expectant, prepared for departure. Unconcernedly I scanned the dim outlines of the great city I called home, and experienced not the slightest tremolo of excitement, though I had been absent twelve years. What welcome had I to expect? Who cared when I came or went? Affection was not for me, and I grew heavy with longing, when, for the first time, I realized how much alone I was in this world. I would never be conscious of anything above the familiar, calculating coldness, sordid cordiality that was continually shown to me and, reflecting bitterly, I knew precisely what awaited me when the steamer docked. Albert would be there with the carriage and his perpetual grin. My wealth prevented me even enjoying the little annoyances fortunate others were subjected to. They could appreciate comfort. I was uncomfortable always. At my residence there would be no excitement, all in readiness as though I had never been absent. Later, if not fatigued I would saunter to the club, there to meet men who, like myself, had no place else to go. They would all hasten to reach my hand and give it the hearty shake men always give to each other whether

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they like you or not, and all would simultaneously exclaim: "Glad to see you back, old man! Remain long? What'll you have?"

I almost yelled with repugnance. Though usually I permitted gloom to entirely envelop me, there was an undercurrent of consolation that few, very few experience—I was able to gratify all whims and execute all resolves, and generally when I reached this conclusion obnoxious meditations evaporated.

I strolled among the chattering, enthused passengers, trying to absorb some of their excitement; finding this difficult, I turned my full attention upon a small, black object in the waters that absentmindedly I had been watching some time. It was headed straight for the steamer and the pert, little craft, battling in the choppy sea, amused me. As it got nearer I discovered three men on the deck intently gazing at the steamer and then—yes—no—Middleton's launch—and the three of them! Middleton, Burke, and Rollins! I yelled to them—by George! the firm had come to welcome me home! I was not forgotten. They spied me, then all yelled, wild with excitement. They extended their hands, so did I, as though it was possible to shake at that distance. The launch finally ran alongside the steamer, and three eager gentlemen boarded her. The bones in my hands were nearly crushed, yet hardly were the greetings over when my former gloomy thoughts rushed flood-like upon me. In vain I tried to drown the painful doubts—pon my soul! I swear these gentlemen had no motive but

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kindness in hurrying to greet me. Why couldn't I be content with the action? What happiness is there in continually searching the motive? Middleton & Co. certainly had regard for me, else would have remained in their comfortable offices such a cold, raw morning. Away with this damned eternal probing, accept what is given, never expect more; yet judging from universal bitter comments of injury, humanity is firm in the belief, more is given than received. Smiling faces, flattering tongues, affectionate attitudes are at least genuine in exertion, why question further? It is enough to cement friendship.

If Middleton & Co. knew of my engaging thoughts while I was wringing their hands they would at once send in a bill for all the advice given gratis since my infancy. What a valuable nature is mine, and what disfigurement is humanity to this gloriously beautiful world.

I remained a month in town, following implicitly the orders of Middleton & Co. We'd had a thorough understanding plus details, and I learned my twelve years abroad had made vast inroads upon my fortune, still I was several centuries from starvation. I chided the old boys for their needless anxiety—Middleton & Co. hung on to every cent they could grasp, then felt injured. Dutifully I dined at each of their homes and gave a return banquet to the club; also, I attended a few extraordinary affairs—decorations, rows of debutantes—then suddenly discovered I didn't owe anybody anything anyhow, and quietly slipped down to my country.

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home that I had not visited in twelve years, and which made me realize for the first time the wonderful pleasure of return. I was born in this simple, rambling, old-fashioned house, surrounded with its acres and acres of boundless wealth. I gloried in the all-pervading peace, the enervating air vibrating with sounds, each a distinct note of music and all blending in superb harmony. I strolled in the orchards, plucking luscious fruit, I gathered my own salads and indulged in the juvenile delight of hunting eggs. I rode with the men upon lofty hay wagons, and lolled countless hours in the fields, dreamily viewing the far-distant valleys sloping gently upward into deep purple mountains, and in all my travels of foreign antiquity flanked with oriental splendor I could remember no land to compare with the grand, vast freshness of this beautiful home scene, nor did I consider time wasted in this sublime appreciation. It seemed the joyous, lazy hours passed in the hot sunshine were simply the rest and peace needed to nerve me for coming events that the supreme inspiration enveloped. The rural quietness did not weary me. I indulged in day dreams and enthused in a thousand plans to be banished as soon as formed, then one morning, as suddenly as I came, I left all this sultry luxury and returned to the city.

With me in dreamland one entire night was Saxlehner, Professor Saxlehner, whom I had not seen or heard of in twelve years. He had appeared vivid, mirthful; we talked long, but with awakening I remembered nothing, simply he had thrust himself

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upon my memory and I returned to the city at once to search for him.

### CHAPTER II.

Middleton & Co. were very hazy concerning Professor Saxlehner. Burke and Rollins knew nothing, but Middleton informed me the Professor had dropped all his old associates when he retired from the college and in return everybody had forgotten him. He (Middleton) understood Saxlehner was involved in some colossal scheme which he had "hung on to" all these years, and so far his only recompense was in testing the delights of a hermit. He lived way out somewhere in the suburbs in a little house of his own, did his own cooking, and was very crabbed to outsiders.

"And why are you hunting up the man?" Middleton asked.

"I intend to remain some time on this side of the ocean," I told him. "I always liked Saxlehner, and simply wished to meet him again. He was the only man who seemed to understand me and naturally we're congenial."

"No harm in looking up the Professor," he said. "I always thought Saxlehner a mighty shrewd fellow and his advice worth heeding. Hunt him up, by all means; splendid idea."

Then Middleton scowled fiercely while I roared. A slip of the tongue and the word was sounded that he always avoided when I was within earshot. Idea, idea, idea. Ah, for a brilliant one!

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Middleton's chagrin was amusing.

Several days later early one morning I and a pair of thoroughbreds speeded toward the suburbs in search of my old friend Saxlehner. I reined up in front of a little old cottage of one floor, cellar and attic. The little front garden was overgrown with tall pink flowers and huge yellow ones with broad green leaves. The gate hung upon one hinge because it liked to, and had to be coaxed to open wide enough to admit one. There was a narrow, graveled path leading up to an olive green door, ornamented with a tarnished brass knocker in the form of a lion's head with a ring through its nose. And here in these parts so peaceful and sunny, old Saxe. had buried himself with his colossal ideas.

I strode up to the olive door, and used the knocker several times with noisy effect. My summons were certainly heard throughout the house and several blocks beyond, but all remained calm, peaceful, no sign of a living creature anywhere. I stepped out to examine the premises and discovered smoke issuing from the chimney, so tried my luck again with a series of startling knocks. I heard footsteps, quick, jerky, irritated footsteps; bolts were snappishly drawn and the door opened violently; there stood Saxe., red and angry, enveloped from head to foot in a huge apron, sleeves rolled up, and armed with a fork.

"Well, young man," he bawled, "might have known I didn't want to be bothered; what d'ye want?"

Same old Saxe., cross and lovable as ever. I took

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off my hat and stood smiling at him. He scowled fiercely for a second, then gasped:

“Salucci! pon my soul! Why, it’s Salucci!”

He grabbed and drew me into the hall, gazing at me in astonishment, chuckling softly. In a second we were wringing each other’s hands as though for a wager.

“Never expected to see you again, my boy,” he told me; “thought you’d forgotten old Saxe. completely. Stay awhile?”

“Might as well,” I answered.

“Good boy!” he laughed. “But, say, send away that wagon out there, the whole neighborhood’ll think I’m sick and you the doctor.”

Saxe. really looked uneasy. I did as he wished, then he took me straight to his little kitchen.

“Getting up dinner,” he explained. “The reason I’m still a man is because I look after my digestion and live well.”

Upon a huge range were several small pots bubbling, and Saxe. went to work like a veteran.

I attempted to account for myself during the twelve years’ absence, but Saxe. cut me short.

“I know all about it,” he said, “kept track of you right along. Regretted very much your sporty life, but when you deserted Folly you cultivated Seriousness at the wrong end. You remained at nothing long enough to make a success; you surrendered to failure right off, and the sincere enthusiast never admits failure. You have wasted many valuable years, but we’ll talk later of that. What I have

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in these poems will improve with simmering. Come, I'll show you about the place."

He escorted me through the tiny hall to several rooms. There was a sitting room, a cozy smoking room, a library, and three bed rooms. The books in the library were piled high from floor to ceiling without shelves or covering, and tumbled in every direction.

"Best way to keep books," he explained, "too open for moths, and mildew never attacks them. Then if you want a book you can lay hand on it at once. I'm here when I'm not in the attic."

We visited the cellar. Saxe. with pride showed me several brands of fancy wine in casks and bottles, and there was a large variety of imported liquors. Two cobwebbed bottles he took from the shelves, remarking: "We'll test them later," and then he led the way to the attic, a most remarkable room, comprising the length and width of the house. It was packed with odd instruments, huge globes and vast maps of the world cut the corners and lined the walls; there were telescopes, and great charts of the heavens, and monstrous cylinders and electric batteries, and tall, crystal columns, filled with fiery hued liquid; and there was a queer steel contrivance resembling a table with the top cut out, and suspended in the center was a huge, crystal globe, pierced by a steel rod. The globe revolved upon this rod with wonderful rapidity. Saxlehner vouchsafed no explanations. Another thing which roused my curiosity was something of vast dimensions carefully covered with canvas. Saxe. jeal-

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ously guarded this treasure, whatever it was, and skillfully turned my attention to other matters.

“And was it for this you resigned everything?” I blurted out.

“Exactly,” he replied.

“Where does it lead to?”

“North Pole.”

I turned to him in astonishment, he stared back defiantly.

I refrained from remark, but—a sensible man like Saxe. should have such a fool desire!

“And the end?” I asked stupidly.

“North Pole!” he cried out impatiently.

“Well! well! well!”

He took my arm and led me down stairs, remarking: “I was about to eat the finest dinner I ever tasted in my life.”

I certainly enjoyed the meal. As a cook, Saxe. was an expert. His superb Sauterne and Chianti loosened our tongues, and Saxe. speedily learned I was wide and adrift as to my future intentions. This was during the pessimistic Sauterne stage, when the preparatory gloom of expected hilarity causes one to view life sadly, and I ended up a long-winded refrain with: “Honestly, Saxe., I believe the end of it all will be a woman!”

Saxe. was horrified.

“A woman!” he yelled, “A woman! good heavens, Salucci, you must be mad!”

“It’s an ordinary madness,” I snapped, “and I see no occasion for excitement if eventually the main idea should develop into a woman. What’s so

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terrible about it? All our brilliant men and heroes end their careers with a woman."

"Stuff!" cried Saxe. "Stuff and nonsense! you're not in earnest, you'd cease to interest me if you were. Yet there's a lot in your statement. Many great men have ended with a woman—that was their death; but all accomplished their ambition before seeking diversion."

I laughed, and told him he had just quoted me—women were the most delightful diversion the world contained. He flushed and tried to appear angry. I laughed louder and asked him how old he was. He seemed younger than when I left college. He shook his head impatiently, and cried, "Fudge! got over all that twenty years ago. I'm near fifty," he told me, "but a man can remain the same age fifteen years. How old do I look?"

"Thirty-five," I answered promptly.

"I thought so," he replied slyly, "a man always remains that at least fifteen years, and it is generally understood we do not reach prime till sixty—ahem!"

We'd reached the Chianti, and also the conclusion that we were both rather fortunate than otherwise in being alive. This is a cheering, vigorous thought, and the Chianti inspired lengthy discussions upon all manner of scientific subjects; and as my interests were centered in the attic Saxe. finally took me up there again.

I made straight for the great canvas covering, and Saxe., who had thrown reserve to the winds, assisted me to remove the covering, and to my as-

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tonished eyes was revealed the monstrous machinery of—what? It was a massive structure composed entirely of steel, and looked like a locomotive resting upon sleds. The snout had a projectile three feet in circumference and nine feet long, terminating at the base to the size of a three karat diamond, and the diamond was there, sparkling and blazing away in serene splendor. A ridiculously small button was pressed and the sleds slowly ascended, exposing the base of the machine, which was shaped like a canoe. Another button pressed and the projectile shot into a socket.

“It’s magnificent! a marvelous invention, Saxe. What’s it intended for?” But Saxe. ignored my question.

“It certainly is a beautiful thing to look at, but useless,” he told me; “a failure which some day I shall master. I am in a fair way to succeed, as I have discovered the faults and now only have to discover the remedy.”

An odd look of hopelessness and defiance shaded his face, he turned as though to hide the expression.

“I haven’t been near it for months,” he continued, “everything is in readiness, though. I keep it that way in case I take the notion and won’t have to waste time in preparations; but to look at it sometimes sickens me.”

“Courage,” I told him, “you cannot fail. You are master of the instrument because aware of its imperfections.”

He sighed heavily, then explained the faults of

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his machine, which I examined with enthusiasm. I became inspired and declared positively I could perfect it. Saxe. smiled and replaced the covering, then trotted me from his treasure room.

"You are a one-idea-at-a-time man; you have said it is the secret of the prolongation of youth. At present your splendid intellect is a blank and I will not take advantage of it. Go, remain away a week, think well of your future, mature what indefinite plans you may have formed. Should you return within the week I know you are free, untrammeled, open to suggestion and the supreme idea. Which-ever way you decide, Salucci, I wish you prosperity and success."

I grasped his hand as he escorted me to the door. I had spent the entire day with him and it was evening now, beautiful with the white light of the moon. Saxe. stepped out to inhale the fresh, balmy air, and greeted a man who was coming up the little gravel path, who informed him it was an indifferent night for observations.

The light from the door fell upon his features and I recognized Professor Saunders, the astronomer, whose lectures I had often listened to with the keenest interest. He greeted me, then murmured something, entered the house and rapidly vanished in the region of the attic. Saxe., anxious to join his friend, rather abruptly bade me good-night, however, reminding me I had been haphazard long enough. "Be decisive," he murmured.

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### CHAPTER III.

I thought of Saxe. and his strange instrument, continually wondering what it was intended for, while my fingers twitched to handle it. The old glamour of Saxe.'s companionship was upon me, again was I ambitious, dauntless, scorning difficulties, confident I could accomplish what he, with all his superior knowledge, had failed to do—perfect and set in motion the machinery that he had nearly wasted his entire life upon.

Anxious to test my ability, positive of success, I lost no time in presenting myself to Saxe. early the next day.

He was hurried when admitting me and speeded down the hall, bidding me to follow.

“Frogs saute,” he explained, “and Saunders and Sheldon are here—know 'em?”

“Met Sheldon some time ago and Saunders last night,” I reminded him.

“So you did, so you did!” he agreed. “Well, you won't disturb them; they're at it, as usual.”

The two gentlemen were seated at a table engrossed with a chart between them and deep in discussion or, more correctly speaking, quarreling. They nodded impatiently as I entered and paid no attention whatever as I seated myself and tried to take a hand in the argument. I moved the chart to suit my convenience and then the gentlemen quit quarreling with each other to take sides against

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me, and I was soon bawling louder than either, my indignation roused to boiling point because they repeatedly yelled: "Hush up, boy, you don't know what you're talking about." Saxe, howled for peace, and passed around something, the flavor of which inspired deep friendship and good fellowship, and amid the jollity he declared I complimented him, always turning up at meal time. I honestly enjoyed dining with the old boys. We sat in our shirt sleeves and conversed in comfort, time no object, and the jokes numerous, whose piquancy only a wit could appreciate.

"And for twelve years," I said, finally, to no one in particular, "you people have been going on like this, easy, careless, comrades always, with the expectation of some day attaining your ambitions."

"Yes," answered Saunders, "comrades always, but not idlers. The twelve years have been mightily employed, we have made much progress toward the great end. My star, 'the star,' scintillates in the same position, been there trillions of years, but invisible because blazing away just above the colossal pivot of Earth. Astronomers have calculated pretty closely the exact position it should occupy on the astral map, but most have calculated wrong. The subject is always an incentive for much controversy, but one and all agree to the certainty of the phenomenon, and if the world revolved according to antiquated supposition—like a ball—we would be permitted to gaze upon the egg-shaped, pinkish-hued marvel. It is the twin planet. My assertions are based upon deep calculations."

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He was daring and—like most daring people—queer. He had joined many expeditions to the north to perfect observations of the polar sphere, but before penetrating very far into the ice regions something or other had always frightened the life most out of him and he returned home with the liveliest speed.

Saxe.'s other crony was Sheldon, a genial, patient, cool old party, who became excited only when arguing with Saunders. He had a mania for rivers, declaring all bodies of fresh water were fed from an under-current which flowed through great arteries, connected with an ocean of fresh water, supposedly located somewhere in the region of the Pole. He had completed arrangements to join the next expedition to the north, his intention to explore around for this great fresh water ocean. His arguments were very convincing and his cool, calm, positive assertions made you almost believe his statements. The man was odd, undoubtedly very odd. And Saxe., dear old Saxe., the hard-headed Professor, whom the boys at college dared not play pranks upon, Saxe., with his wonderful inventive genius and vast researches in scientific regions, this man with the brilliant brain, was living in seclusion with a set of cranks and wasting his life upon the North Pole. He formed no wild theories based upon wilder calculations, it was to discover the unknown summit, and he vowed he would do it before he died. The determination of all three men was inspiring. They had their clientele, of course, and their writings were widely read. Sheldon was fa-

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mous as a lecturer and ranked high in various Geographical-Geological societies, who, however, considered his views concerning the vast ocean of fresh water rather as a joke, a side issue, a hobby; he was not taken seriously. Saunders was a scientific writer of renown and referred to as an authority upon the stellar science, but astronomers while listening gravely, sympathetically, to his learned discourse upon the known but invisible planet, were frankly skeptical and a daring few challenged him. It was then, Sheldon informed me, that Saunders spunkily made his rushing trips to the north and back again, then stoically issued a new thesis upon the invisible twin world which usually silenced, for a time, his derogators. But Saxe., no one dared exchange witticisms with him, his natural secretive-ness and air of mystery he affected made all regard him with awe and boosted him to the celebrity class. His studied aloofness forced continual respect, something few brilliant men have been able to retain.

“Spread, air your plans,” he said, “and at once you lose interest in them; they never again belong entirely to you; besides, people shy at you. Hopes keep as invisible as your heart.”

He was wonderful in his firm belief that he of all men was destined to discover the North Pole.

And here after all my wanderings and bizarre experiences, my strong ambitions and brilliant ideas, I, with my vast wealth and equally vast longings, winded up with this strange trio. But their buoyant confidence attracted me, it was an entirely new

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atmosphere, permeated with a wild, mystic charm. Saunders' beautiful, invisible star, Sheldon's vast body of limpid, fresh water, and the Pole, with all the mysteries of the dead portion of the earth surrounding it; here was a new experience, a grand, new experience, unique; enough to satisfy the most blasé.

Sheldon and Saunders remained till late, but when Saxe. and I were alone he regarded me keenly, gravely.

"As usual," he said, "you have disregarded all advice, flung aside all plans definite or otherwise, to plunge headlong into—have you any idea what it is you are about to take up?"

"Most congenial company I've encountered for years," I replied. "Saxe., I'm as much alone upon this earth as though the only mortal treading it; don't deny me the pleasure of your company, surely we've all passed a very jolly afternoon together."

"You didn't return for that," he said sharply; "as for the two who have just left, they can be joyful, they live in their imaginations, I upon facts. They need encouragement, they're doomed to disappointment, while I, Salucci, God! millions and millions of leagues away, hardly discernible, yet I can see—Triumph gleams and sparkles, and beckons. I shall accomplish all I've undertaken; success is for me. I've spent my whole life upon one grand scheme, while you have wasted yours upon a dozen. You misdirect, waste your vitality, your energy evaporates, you accomplished nothing; not one of your brilliant ideas absorbed you; insincere always, sim-

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ply a pastime. Success naturally frowned, and all these years you might have been comfortably asleep."

His object in taking this tone I didn't question, but his talking did me a world of good; ambition fired me, I was positive that at last I had discovered the supreme idea.

"I've formed no plans for the future," I told him, "and returned to you because I wish to put my new idea in action at once. I've decided to join you; there'll be four instead of three—a gold backing, and there's no such thing as failure. Inform me of every detail of your great scheme, initiate me into the mysteries of your attic. Saxe., I swear I can perfect your machinery."

He stared, his face quite white; this time he did not smile at my boast. We rose together and clasped hands across the table, and he, his voice husky with emotion, murmured: "It is the noblest, grandest scheme ever created, but the end may feaze you; still, I believe you to be sincere this time, may your genius aid you to perfect what I have slaved a lifetime over. Come!"

Up the narrow, creaking stairs we went. Saxe. flooded the place with light and there was the monstrous machinery with unsightly covering, which he reverently removed, and the masterpiece of steel was revealed in all its glory. The polish of the cylinder, and great propeller which failed to work, was dazzling; the delicate lace tracery wrought in the steel wrung from me a cry of admiration.

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"Shame, shame, Saxe., what a shame it is imperfect!"

He shook his head. "It enrages me," he cried vehemently, "to be able to plan a thing like that, then to be devoid of the trick to perfect it, for it will be by chance, a trick I have so far been unable to hit."

With delight I placed my hands upon the shining metal, then slowly, deliberately began taking the huge instrument apart.

Saxe. remonstrated wildly and wished to explain, but I knew his explanations would take hours and his persistence finally so annoyed me I caught him by the shoulders and rushed him from the room quickly, closing and locking the door. He clamored for admittance and bawled instructions.

"I am responsible for all damage," I called through the keyhole. I heard him sigh heavily as I turned away, but became so absorbed with my task that I forgot him, everybody. I took that machine apart and placed it together again, I don't know how many times. I was unconscious of fatigue, heedless of time, and after hours of tedious work was courageous and alive with energy. But the strain at last must have dazed me, I was confused when putting the infernal instrument together for the final time and made the blunder that ended the difficulty. Wheels, shafts, slides seemed to fit easier into sockets; screws, pins shot into cavities without a rasp. I noticed this, but supposed I was becoming expert, having taken the thing apart so many times, but when the steel monster again tow-

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ered before me complete I cussed softly, and for the first time doubted my skill. The beauty, contour of the machine was ruined. I would try it again of course, but I was a fool to attempt where Saxe. had failed. Cautiously I set to work to discover the blunder and accidentally touched the propeller, which suddenly rose and shot into its socket and started all portions of the machine into action. I caught my breath, not daring to believe, then commenced experimenting by uncoupling the brakes. The instrument darted forward several yards without the customary whirring noise which warned the operator of a smash-up. I could have shouted for joy—Saxe.'s machine was perfected—I had succeeded.

I discovered the cylinders were partially filled with a peculiar, odorless liquid, and recklessly entered the car and adjusted the lever. The locomotive jerkily responded and slowly we rolled around the room. I had much difficulty steering clear of the walls and various articles in the way and became interested and perplexed in the regular action of the propeller, which shot in and out as though seeking something to demolish, and at last, for all my care, the diamond prod crashed into a huge square of glass and crushed it to atoms. Then it flashed upon me what Saxe.'s invention was intended for and in spite of myself I shouted. An answering shout reached me from the landing outside. I sprang from the car and flung open the door. Three men, wild with excitement, rushed in upon me. Saxe. grabbed and embraced me, yelling all sorts

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of foolish things. Sheldon and Saunders caught my hands and bawled their congratulations. My head throbbed and I grew dizzy with joy. The reaction set in, my stamina deserted me, the wild entrance of the enthusiastic trio roused me as from a dream. As though an eternity away, like a zephyr, Saxe.'s voice reached me.

"Two days and a half, Virgilius, my boy; it was an awful strain. I hammered repeatedly upon the door, but I don't believe you even heard."

"Two days and a half," I muttered drowsily, then drank the liquor some one handed to me and without further ceremony dropped off to sleep.

### CHAPTER IV.

Saxe. christened his machine *Propellier*, an aptly chosen name, then rushed into print. He was mobbed by scientific societies, and lectured widely about everything except what his "marvelous invention" was intended for; and it became public wonder to what use this machine was to be put that would butt, crush, and pass over all obstacles.

As he mentioned me continually in connection with the *Propellier*, we were both much interviewed and written up lengthily.

Cranks clustered around the little house in the suburbs, and almost annoyed the life out of Saxe. with their arrogant demands, and police protection became necessary.

Saxe. was famous and sailed the wave of popu-

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larity for about three weeks, and then—well, all waves recede, but this one simply calmed. Saxe. and his invention were not forgotten, because he was wise enough to keep the public guessing. Later, when preparations were progressing rapidly for the one great aim of his life, he in his thankfulness became more communicative, satisfying curiosity, ending all doubts. He lectured before a vast throng of scientists, educators, and students, who wildly applauded him as he divulged the secret of his ambition and the usefulness of his invention. He declared the Pole would never be discovered without the aid of science, and his invention would greatly lessen the many hardships previous explorers suffered (applause). All the tremendous difficulties of Arctic travel would vanish before the terrible force of the *Propellier*; and he verged nicely into details with deep explanations, and ended he would reach the Pole, then explore the surrounding territory.

Seated upon the stage were several famous lecturers, all had a few remarks to make, chiefly in discouragement of Saxe.'s grand project, placing great stress upon real and imaginary obstacles, and aggravating the listeners enthused with Saxe.'s scheme; but he was too far gone to heed advice, happy that his years of labor were over, he sat there smiling and chuckling.

Saunders had his little say also, spoke glowingly of the expedition, and became eloquent over his wondrous northern star of the brilliant pinkish hue. His statements were positive, and many in the audi-

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ence nodded approval, and he was enthusiastically applauded when he finally ended his remarks.

Then Sheldon, encouraged by his colleagues and not to be outdone by Saunders in one little instance, rose and exploded his theory concerning the rivers, lakes and vast body of fresh water supposedly located in the vicinity of the Pole. He created a sensation and in his enthusiasm stated as facts the most preposterous hallucinations, and smiles were broad while college veal showed its appreciation in squeaks and irrepressible guffaws, to be frowned upon by their superiors, who were making the most outrageous grimaces themselves. But Sheldon was blind, as were also the large number of sympathizers present, who listened eagerly and believed every word he uttered and cheered him loudly when he resumed his seat. Sheldon proved the star attraction among the large assemblage of wise men.

My three friends became known throughout the press as "the three renowned," and the expedition to the North Pole was written up learnedly, ending with the statement, the start would be made early in the spring; whereupon a wag, itching for a thrashing, suggested we take the Relief Party along, as there was nothing like having things convenient. My own name invariably ended all articles where apparently it had been roped in as an after-thought, and I discovered I belonged to the expedition. Here indeed was an idea, but I refused to entertain it. I was open for much enterprise, but the North Pole was beyond my latitude.

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Then Middleton, Burke and Rollins swooped down upon me, each armed with a paper and anxiety upon their faces, and gravely I told them the Pole was Saxlehner's property, and I had no desire to buy it from him. I confided to them my doubts of the whole undertaking and that positively I wanted none of it. My assurance greatly calmed the old boys. To deceive them was my last thought, for I had not the remotest idea of joining the expedition. My slim genius refused to risk life for science. I had a mighty discussion and determined settlement with the "renowned ones" concerning the financial problem. I knew the three cronies could not rake up a thousand between them, but the amazing fact was forced upon me that they seriously objected to accepting funds from me. Sheldon was balky, Saunders grimly uncompromising, and Saxe declared he would not have those three "sharks" claiming he had bunkoed me into the scheme. It was Saxe's positive belief that the firm of Middleton & Co. were the greatest sharks out of water.

But I argued with the stubborn trio, and pressed the issue determinedly when I saw them weakening. I laughed heartily at Saunders's hesitating suggestion that the government would contribute largely toward the expense of the expedition, also that many scientific societies all over the world would render valuable assistance. I did not doubt his assertion, for it would have created the widest of gulfs, but I reminded him that in about ten years the expedition would be ready to start. This ended

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the controversy. The very idea of delay threw the old boys into despair, and for twelve years they had been waiting for just such an opportunity as I offered them.

With plans that had been formed for years and unlimited capital at their disposal, arrangements were rushed to completion.

For weeks Saxe., Sheldon, and Saunders worked like beavers. Saxe. was as jealous of his invention as a lover of his mistress; no one was permitted to inspect his work and the *Propellier* and three steel cars were cast and completed by himself. I assisted him in taking apart and packing the machinery in crates. Saxe. was a wonderful manager, the whole of the extensive preparations were left entirely to him per arrangement. He gave the closest attention to the most insignificant item, perfecting each little detail. He chartered a vessel and made a cast-iron agreement with the shipping company that vessels were to cruise around in Arctic waters at certain dates and locations every year for seven years; if we failed to turn up at the end of that period the agreement was called off. He stored in provisions for a seven year cruise but privately told me they would discover the Pole, and return in less than three years. In my heart I believed they would never return. The idea was to sail as far north as possible. Saxe. calculated on reaching the Pole six or eight weeks after starting with the *Propellier*. The three were thoroughly familiar with the ice country and had their route mapped out first-rate, but I was dubious;

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it seemed to me nothing less than suicide, yet Saxe. was thoroughbred in his work and his confidence exhilarating. From the start I had been closely associated with the three famous scientists, and eventually it became noised about that Salucci, the millionaire, was to head the expedition. As I neither affirmed nor denied the report my indecision caused the three "sharks" to storm the citadel in the suburbs.

Saxe. had a wordy war with Middleton & Co., but they capitulated before his lengthy explanations and departed satisfied, enthusiastic, privately informing me the Professor was a wonderful man and that it was preposterous that he could fail; and for the first time in my life I was flinging my money away sensibly. I notified them of my intention to escort the expedition north to a certain point, then return with the ship. My unusual lack of enthusiasm allayed their suspicions and convinced them I was meditating some new enterprise. Unknowingly I deceived the old gentlemen, my sudden reticence was to avoid making positive promises. I wished to be untrammelled in case enthusiasm forced me at the last moment to cast my luck with Saxe., but I doubted if any sensation could inveigle me into such a rash proposition as that Saxe., Sheldon, and Saunders were contemplating, but I remained silent.

About two weeks before the date of departure Saxe., satisfied with the outlook, and but a few minor details to attend to, ordered an easing up of labor and we made the astonishing discovery we

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were notorious. It seemed the interest of the entire world was centered upon us, and it made Saxe. crabbed. He had lived so long in seclusion and the one idea, had figured and planned and became so thoroughly familiar with the northern zone—on the map—that he could see nothing unusual in his stupendous undertaking and thought no more of it than I would of a trip to Europe.

“It’s a private expedition taken solely to test the theories of a few scientists. The public didn’t pungle up with any funds, so whose concern is it, anyhow?” he wanted to know, and blamed Middleton & Co., because he was misquoted in fake interviews, though what they had to do with it was a mystery. He took it upon himself to answer all adverse criticisms, and was eminently successful in routing a few daring doubters. In the scientific world the “renowned illustrious” were considered heroes. They lectured before colleges and vast scientific bodies, and their writings in scientific publications were widely read. They indulged in numerous unaccustomed diversions and were banqueted almost nightly. I thought it a poor way to prepare the constitution for polar hardships, but Saxe. said once out of civilization we would become normal again. However, I decided to call a halt and rescued my three brave comrades from the courtesies they could not resist, by giving a return banquet to those who had honored us. It was our farewell, a sumptuous farewell, which remained long in the memory of those who attended, but ended tragically for me—the experience was destiny. Wine flowed

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freely, gayety ran high, toasts, speech-making the order; some one started a noisy song and all, even Saxe., joined in shouting the chorus. I shouted as loud as any, not prompted by wine, but intent all should enjoy themselves. I had drunk sparingly, though well seasoned and able to stand more than most. They called upon me for a speech and the wits jocularly twitted me about the ladies. So I toasted a dainty, little creature, who, like all celebrities, was commonplace upon acquaintance. The boys yelled at my choice. I twirled my glass recklessly, eager to spout some of my own verses, but suddenly an odd change came upon me, I felt ill and chilled, then apathetic, numbed; the glass fell with a smash. I could utter no sound, but saw all watching me curiously. Middleton rose in alarm, but Saxe. reached me first and caught me as I fell forward inert, helpless, but painfully conscious. I deeply regretted my sudden indisposition, my collapse created a panic and ended the evening's festivities.

An intensely cold air suddenly rushed upon me, chilling my blood. I was being conveyed to some place, but could distinguish nothing in the vague, dreamy vapor gradually enveloping me, which became heavier and heavier, forming a dark wall surrounding me in a silence deep, oppressive; then like a flash I saw clear again, and to my amazement was in my rooms alone seated at the table, book in hand, comfortable, peaceful, while a tornado scourged the city. It was a night of inky blackness, freezingly cold, and vaguely I felt sympathy for the home-

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less, and those obliged to be out in such a storm; then there was the sound of crashing timber and frightful shrieks roused me from my lethargy and I realized I would not be spared for all my riches. Violent gusts of wind shook the building. I feared the roof would cave in and crush me, yet calculated nicely just how long it would take for the expected to happen. I felt no alarm or discomfort at the destruction going on, but when too late realized peril in the awful roaring, fateful crash in my vicinity. The walls of my rooms fell apart, the ceiling rose and was carried away and I borne with frightful velocity upon the wind, tossed hither and thither; and this tornado with the strength of a hundred thousand giants had the gentleness of a lover. Upon a bed of soft, flaky clouds I finally floated in delicious tranquillity and gradually with exquisite tenderness I was lowered to a wonderful world of down. As far as the eye reached was a vast plain of fairy-land, dazzling in whiteness, maddening in silence, with a ridge of pale mountains gleaming blue, phantom-like. My flesh quivered with the cold, but I was powerless to move or cry out; and here in this great, icy throne, was I forced to sit and gaze at the desolate wilderness of snow, snow, snow; a vast, strange region, with dead, suffocating vapor clinging to my nostrils; dumb, a prey to fear and wonder. The roar and crash of the tornado; anything but this horrible stillness with the heavy dread enveloping me. I remained there forever, it seemed, but gradually my eyes became accustomed to the dull, leaden atmosphere, and I perceived far, far in

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the distance, a small point of color advancing. Over the ridge of myth mountains it bounded with wonderful velocity, this rolling circle of light, the nearer it approached swelled to enormous dimensions, a huge globe of dull, ominous red, betraying the force, the foundation of destruction. This gigantic world of fire with marvelous bounds sped straight toward me, I seemingly the magnet. I tried to move; could not. On it came with increasing rapidity, I directly in its path. It would come—it would pass over me—God! The horror of the position broke my dumbness, I shrieked and shrieked and lived through the tortures of the damned. The hell globe was most upon me, then as though with fiendish mockery it retreated, then advanced, then retreated again, it swayed back and forth as though attached to a mighty pendulum swung in the grasp of some sinister monster. I shut my eyes—I had committed no crime except in being rich—and waited ages, ages it seemed for oblivion. But nothing happened, no great weight of intense heat crushed me, all was as before, icy, still. I ventured to glance around, the great, fiery globe was there, but farther away burning less vividly, it became dull, duller, and finally with a loud explosion burst apart, forming into a fiery stage for a wondrous scene. In amazement I gazed upon the blackish-red clouds, curling thickly upward. In the smoking midst a reclining form floated and undulated, gathering and manipulating the density till all was consumed and in the vivid clearness a gorgeous scene was revealed. In wonder and delight I gazed into

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the burning splendor at a myth, houri, such ravishing beauty could not be mortal. Thick masses of jetty hair mingled with the heavy, dusky clouds; starry, flashing eyes burned into mine and scorched me; tall, majestic, scintillating with jewels, red lips parted in an alluring smile, she beckoned to me. I stared, fascinated. She drew to her side an odd instrument and her white fingers caressed the wires, music there must have been, but I could not hear. As I watched a shadow appeared which gradually grew firmer, taking form and finally the dim outlines of a man were revealed bending eagerly toward the luxurious creature. He was pleading, passionate admiration betrayed in his whole attitude. And this man, this man with his slavish devotion was—myself. I, the man of the world, the cynic with a well-known temperament of an icicle. I gazed astounded at this shadow of myself and my heart warmed and beat violently as I watched the strangely beautiful vision; in that moment I loved, loved almost as madly as the shadow. She turned as though in welcome to another, then suddenly a brilliant, golden light shrouded the whole, the globe of fire crashed together and bounded away in space, tinging the universe with a glorious roseate hue. With the last vanishing streak of pink came desolation; in the midst of this gloom a man approached walking rapidly, determinedly. He reached me and passed without heeding my call. I yelled after him, he turned—the man's face was my own. On he went with great strides, obstacles faded beneath the power of his will. I followed, though not conscious

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of moving, and at last with a shout of triumph, he halted upon the highest peak of the phantom mountains, one foot sunk to the knee in snow, the other ankle deep in rich, rank grass.

“Saxe.!” he shouted, “Saxlehner!”

His voice rang clarion-like over the vast prairies of ice and snow, the piercing sound echoed in my ears and startled me out of my trance; my eyes opened wide in reason. I was lying upon a couch in my own room, the sun streamed broadly through the open window, and Saxe. sat at the table drinking coffee and reading the morning paper. My head was swathed in ice-cold bandages, but the slightest movement gave me excruciating pain.

“Saxe.!” I called.

“All right, my boy,” he answered; “feel better?”

“What’s the row?”

“Oh, nothing serious, just the usual thing,” he replied. “If it hadn’t been for me you would have gone to sleep under the table, where most of them passed the night, I imagine.”

“Was that really what ailed me? I thought it was a trance.”

“Fact!” chuckled Saxe. “Trance, eh? well, well, well—trance! But it’s usually mentioned that way, I believe. There are others this morning whose sick heads makes them positive about it. Trance!”

“Did I break up the fun?”

“You were merely an incident; after your removal the fun grew wilder, I understand. But honestly, Salucci, I didn’t think it of you, I didn’t.” And Saxe. gazed sternly at my pallid countenance,

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then pulling down the shades he advised me to rest.

I lay there with my aching head and thought of my wondrous vision. The marvelous beauty of it all so distinctly impressed me that I could gloat over the slightest detail. I reveled in reverie and saw again the sweet, alluring smile, deep, burning eyes, and royal magnificence of raiment. My desires ruled me as with a great heart throb I realized I loved; I the last of a long line of scorning people who could not realize the sweet passion. And such love! such adoration! It steeped my whole being in delight. I was reckless, folly full, madly enamoured with a phantom—an ideal. The dull-red globe with its reflecting golden mist enshrouding the brilliant, gorgeous creature, haunted me, and again and again the shadow of myself treading the wide snow plains and lofty ice mountains, the whole enveloped in the mystery of the Unknown, convincing me of the truth of the inspired idea treasured in the fabulous cell of Thought, the extravagance of which I dared not utter. The vision of midnight tresses would become a reality. I would search the earth and seek this woman in her own world. I would be successful. It was fate. My adoration would kindle desire as the beauty had fired me; and then . . . .

### CHAPTER V.

I had a long consultation with Saxe., then joined the expedition. I expected he would try to dissuade me from my intention, but on the contrary, he

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seemed singularly happy at my decision and confided to me his strange, strange theory.

"I do not search for the Pole," he told me, "but for the great countries I know exist beyond. The world has never been fully explored, and, Virgilius, it never will be. Once, long ago, ships never sailed beyond the Strait of Gibraltar, the great waste of water meeting the horizon line was simply the 'jumping-off place.' Later, according to civilization, Europe, Asia, and Africa comprised the world, and history relates the jeers Columbus's contrary but positive assertions received. We've made rapid progress since those primitive times.

"Explorers usually are blessed with vivid imaginations—those who seek the Pole, expect to discover a vast continent on the other side; all have the same positive idea concerning the unknown regions, but dare not express them. Now take Sheldon," he continued, "do you suppose a man of his learning expects to discover a great body of fresh water in the Arctic zone? Not much! And Saunders, and his wonderful star, whose existence has never been disputed by scientific readers of the heavens. He declares the earth egg-shaped, not round, as many commonly believe has been proven—nothing has been proven. The great twin planet is visible upon the other side of this globe similar to the Moon, which exposes but one side of her disc to us—the uninhabited sphere."

I gasped. Saxe. chuckled at my astonishment and grasped my hand.

"Glad you've joined us, my boy," he said. "It's a

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good move. You'll find more confined within the boundary of Earth than in your wildest dreams of paradise. Now, tell me—why have you so suddenly decided to join the expedition?"

He looked at me keenly and I felt my face burning hot but remained mute. Saxe. dropped my hand. "Keep it to yourself," he said. "I dare say it's a very good reason; it ought to be, you're so jealous of it, and I'll learn all about it in good time. Don't mention our conversation to Saunders, or Sheldon; as intimate as we are the subject has never gone beyond the Pole. We all actually believe we're greatly fooling the other, but Saunders will travel till he beholds his star; Sheldon will never halt till he discovers his phenomenal body of water; and I, I have worked for years and spent my last cent that ultimately I can be the discoverer of the other side of the globe. And you, Virgilius, you are going because you—er—have nothing else to do?"

I laughed and took up my hat to depart. How the devil could I tell the old sport I was going to the North Pole, in search of—er—a woman. I, who fancied myself above the ordinary, a side light to gleam and flash fitfully, never with the steady glow of genius, found myself in the category of every-day, commonplace men, whose careers always end with a woman, as I now dared hope mine would.

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The day finally arrived when we were to steam away upon our long, venturesome voyage. I was

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the last to board the little whaling vessel. Saxe., Sheldon, and Saunders were on deck busily occupied. Saxe. had an elderly female clinging and sobbing upon his shoulder, accompanied by two pretty girls with red eyes and sniffles. Saunders was standing apart, holding tightly the hand of a young man who appeared very serious, and talked very rapidly, while Saunders listened with that aggravating air—talk-away-young-man-if-it-makes-you-feel-better-but-it's-useless. The young man was Saunders, Jr. Sheldon, obvious to everything, was up in a corner embracing a portly dame, who wept copiously. Portly dame unknown and nobody's business. I became as blind as a bat, and was hailed by Middleton & Co., who nabbed me after a red-hot chase and started to argue. Never was such eloquence heard outside the bar. The gentlemen had suddenly become convinced I was deceiving them, and their suspicions and fears had to be quieted. I felt ashamed of myself, but could not give up the expedition. My brain throbbed with the memory of the blazing vision, and my three lawyers put aside their dignity and trotted to keep up with me as I paced the deck with amorous strides. I hurried the trio to my cabin, opened several bottles, and out-argued them, till finally, Middleton, sighing heavily, wrung my hand in parting.

"Keep your word, my boy," he warned.

"And what do you expect me to do?" I asked.

"Oh, never mind," he replied, "only see that you return."

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"That I certainly will," I told him, and I kept my word.

I felt sorry to part with the old boys, but honestly it was a relief to see them trooping from the ship with other visitors. I did not feel safe from them till I saw them on the wharf waving their kerchiefs as we pulled out. Saxe. walked up and down smoking vigorously, answering very testily if any one dared address him. Saunders was leaning dangerously forward over the railing, bawling to the young man on the pier, who was bawling back at him, neither understanding what the other was bawling. Sheldon, with a red nose, was seated upon a barrel sentimentally studying a photo, presumably of the portly one ; and all three, I firmly believe, were willing to back out of the expedition if they dared. We were forced to drop all sentimental nonsense and acknowledge the magnificent send-off tendered us, though every last blessed mortal who wished us luck were positive we would never return. Bare-headed the four of us shouted and gesticulated like mad in response to the hubbub ; bedlam reigned ; our ship was surrounded by every conceivable craft in existence. The ear-splitting shriek of infernal tugs, and launches, nearly drove us demented, making us deaf to the salutes of little white-halls, and yachts, crowded with wealthy, idle men in flannels, who whooped as we steamed past, roused to momentary enthusiasm because they had nothing else to do. The pleasure-seekers accompanied us till the swell of heavy seas drove them back one by one, and at last, thank Heaven! the awful din was quieted

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and we, speeding swiftly, alone, between water and sky toward the goal Saxe. had worked a lifetime for. He became very chummy with the captain, who was the most profane man I ever ran across.

Sheldon and Saunders found their charts and quarrels so interesting, I was left entirely to myself, though ennui was killed in vain dreams of an image, an impossibility, thrilling and rousing dormant sensibilities I did not believe myself possessed of. I idled away hours, becoming absolutely useless, and Saxe. dispensing with my services, ordered me from the box he had converted into a laboratory.

At his expressed wish we anchored at several northern ports, and were usually received by a committee of speech-making asses, who forced banquets, balls and receptions upon us. At one port two of the crew deserted and delayed us four days; then when all was in readiness for departure, Saxe., to our astonishment, was missing. We appealed to the captain, who declared, if necessary, he would wait six months for Saxlehner, who he was confident, however, would be along soon. Sheldon confidentially told me he believed Saxe. had deserted, while Saunders fretfully hoped the expedition wasn't going to end here. Saxe.'s absence was beginning to worry us, when towards the close of the following day he put in an appearance, very tired but exultant, and that night several hundred cans of two gallons each containing some mysterious fluid was shipped aboard. This explained Saxe.'s absence, and he explained the mysterious

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chemical was used in his secret solution which supplied the motor power to the *Propellier*, and was absolutely proof against what he termed "atmospheric influence," and could be procured in large quantities only in this vicinity. At this stage of the explanation I departed. I knew Saxe. would divulge nothing, his secretive method in securing the chemical was sufficient for me. Not to a living soul would Saxe. ever impart the knowledge of how he manufactured his marvelous electric fluid, but Saunders and Sheldon hung on in the vain hope that Saxe. in his enthusiasm might forget himself; and this after all their years of association with him. They had failed to discover that he was the worst old fox in creation. As there was no further cause for dallying we decided to slight those ports where we were expected to anchor and steamed straight for the north. Four days out we encountered a heavy storm, high seas washed the decks clean of everything. Affairs looked serious at one time, but Captain Norris buoyed us up with the information this was merely a trifle to what we were fated to encounter before we reached the Pole. Saunders said he predicted the storm from the position of wind clouds and atmospheric, etc., etc., etc. Sheldon declared it was brought on by Saxe.'s meddling with combustibles, and aggravated by Sally's volcanic thoughts (a dig at my idleness).

The storm lasted three days, then one morning the sun rose in all serenity and we were nearing the coast of Greenland.

To please various prominent individuals who

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continually worried him with suggestions, Saxe favored the Nansen route, though his own had been mapped out years ago when the *Propellier* was in its infancy. "Following a northerly flowing current was all right for Nansen, and the *Fram*," he argued, "but the famous Polar Basin, free of ice, has still to be located—Nansen failed."

He had great admiration for Dr. Kane, considering him the bravest and most scientific of explorers.

"His dash for the Pole was not successful, because with all his tremendous knowledge he neglected the fact that the unknown, frozen north must be traversed by steel and steam, as is the civilized portion of the globe; and," he continued, "we have progressed immensely since 1850," then saluted deeply to our vigorous applause.

"Boys," he cried, waving his cap, "I swear we shall succeed."

Even Norris, though shaking his head, joined us in cheering.

Meanwhile we steamed steadily north, up through Davis Strait, viewing the great island of Greenland, bleak, cold, sterile, arctic. We anchored in the calm, deep blue waters of Baffins Bay, a half mile from the icy, snowy coast, and our luggage packed in small boats was towed to land. The captain and crew rendered us every assistance. These men had become wonderfully kind to us, believing firmly we were going to our death. Under their experienced hands tents for our accommodation reared as by magic, and we began the work of

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putting the *Propellier* together. Captain Norris had little faith in the *Propellier*, he asserted positively the machine would take us beyond human aid then "bust up." He informed us of his intention to tarry in this vicinity several weeks; in case things went wrong with us he could hurry to the relief and gladly take us back to civilization.

"It's on my conscience," he told us, "you cannot succeed; but men with a fair amount of intelligence to risk their lives in a perilous attempt to reach the Pole deserve to die. The world is overflowing with asses, but those who commit such rash deeds are evil asses. Gentlemen, pardon me, but encouragement is criminal. Why are you going?" he asked us sternly, "For the benefit of science? Fudge! Professor Saunders, in search of a star! Bah! the sky is overcrowded with stars. Prove they are inhabited and you will benefit science. Professor Sheldon expects to discover a huge body of fresh water resting placidly in hollow ice mountains upon the frozen surface of the Polar Sea. And Saxlehnner, with his remarkable invention, intends to return with the Pole under his arm! Oh, gentlemen, gentlemen! And you," he continued, addressing me, "you with your millions, why in God's earth are you going?"

He argued some time, telling me I was the lover of Dame Fortune, and gold the magnet of the universe. No one disputed with him and the poor old fellow's voice finally quivered and broke, he turned away.

We felt as sorry for Norris as he felt for us.

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He'd done his best to persuade us to give up our polar trip—the absurdity of the effort was too profound for laughter. Saxe. took the captain aside and eased the troublesome conscience, convincing the poor gentleman, as he had everybody else, of the perfect efficiency of his invention. He invited him to examine the instrument which was rapidly nearing completion, and patiently explained each portion of the machinery. Norris became very interested and returned to his ship highly enthused over the *Propellier*. We had pitched camp in the midst of a little Esquimaux village, the chief told Saxe., who became very friendly with the tribe, being able to speak a few words of their language, that they settled here every season for the whaling and fishing. They pried around a good deal and interestingly watched us working upon the *Propellier*. They seemed to regard us with suspicion, but never failed to bring daily tokens of their esteem in the way of fresh fish and oil. Saxe. repaid their gifts with long strings of bright colored beads, which presumably he packed along for that purpose. Captain Norris and his men were on land most of the time assisting us, and created considerable jollity. One or two of the crew started flirtations with several Esquimaux women, rousing the ire of the men, who proceeded to chastise their women. I had not noticed the facial characteristics of the Esquimaux sufficiently to distinguish the sexes, they all looked alike, and when I saw them quarreling and fighting I thought the whole settlement had gone on the war-path, possibly over Saxe.'s beads, and we were in

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for it. Norris, between shouts of laughter, informed me of my error and that the women were thrashing the men.

The *Propellier* and cars were eventually ready for the great trial trip. The captain was invited to join us. He seemed dubious but accepted, and as we entered the car the same thought came to every blessed mother's son of us—what if the blamed instrument should explode—we compared notes after the trip. I turned sick at the thought that now we were about to commence our journey in earnest the *Propellier* might fall short—we were all frank about our uneasiness. Saxe. alone had faith in his instrument and swaggered through the car to his place at the engine. All the sailors, and the whole Esquimaux settlement turned out to see us off with whoops, and yells, that would have sent a troop of Apaches scurrying in fright. Just at starting, the *Propellier*'s siren let off an ear-splitting blast that, in the clear atmosphere, must have been heard for miles. Saxe. went very confidently about his work, handling the great steel lever with expert skill. The *Propellier* dipped gracefully forward, we moved slowly. The sailors and Esquimaux followed with leaps and shouts, and one merry sailor placed his shoulder against the hind car as though to shove it forward and help us along; he was hooted and cheered in turn by his laughing comrades, but he came to grief. Saxe., oblivious, intent, sure of the result, watched the strange little electric time-piece set above the lever which he pressed several notches farther down, we bounded forward, gliding as

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smooth as oil, and the suddenness of the start caused the meddlesome sailor to fall—hard.

We literally flew, running at a rate of speed I did not believe the *Propellier* could ever reach, and as yet the lever nob had traveled but one-half its notched road, and Saxe. would test the full length. His eyes gleamed, and his usually ruddy face became pallid and pinched. He bent in a listening attitude and slowly pressed the lever to its last notch; the *Propellier* had reached the speed limit. The runners plowed the snow deeply, which flew up, covering the windows; we seemed to be traveling in the air; I grew dizzy with the marvelous velocity. Our captain seemed uneasy and wished to remonstrate with Saxe. to lessen speed, but Saunders pushed him aside in time. It was useless to speak with him now, Saxe. would not even hear; heart, soul, his very life, was bound up in his invention. Should the *Propellier* fail now that it had reached perfection, his heart would break or he would lose his reason. I went and stood beside him, the perspiration was streaming down his pale face, his tense attitude must have been painful; in very pity I was drawn to him. He was peering through the round magnifying window which brought the distant scenery to closer view, revealing the ruggedness of the snow plains. Suddenly the *Propellier* swerved, then with a wide, graceful turn made at full speed for camp. Saxe. rose to his full height, the color returned to his face and he heaved a deep sigh of relief, then saluted us.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “my invention is success-

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ful. I have the honor to state we shall reach the North Pole, in less than nine weeks."

From our hearts we cheered the old boy, our whoops mingled with the shrill shrieks of the siren, and our return to camp was welcomed with noisy delight.

Captain Norris shook hands with Saxe., who beamed with joy. He was congratulated upon his success, and received the congratulations with the loftiness of genius.

The *Propellier* was perfect. The trip lasted one hour and twenty minutes, and the highest rate of speed reached ninety-five miles an hour.

## CHAPTER VI.

Three days later we started upon our adventurous trip to the Pole. Captain Norris, when bidding us farewell, hoped we would all meet again. "Undoubtedly," Saxe. replied, "undoubtedly we'll all meet again, but perhaps not for years. All depends upon the atmosphere—ahem! I fear evaporation of the fluid in the *Propellier's* cylinders. Should this occur we'll be absent indefinitely. Many contend the earth's summit is located at 90 degrees," continued Saxe., in his most argumentive manner, "this is preposterous, but were it so that portion of the globe would have been explored long ago. The earth's summit is at 100 degrees. I state this as a fact, and the difficulties I expect to encounter will be beyond the ninetieth degree. The atmos-

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phere will be so compressed as to cause either an explosion of the fluid in the tanks, or gradual evaporation. For either calamity I am altogether unprepared, and consequently figure on the homeward journey to be one of acute hardship, and consuming an indefinite period. But shadows exist only where there's brightness. At any rate we have provisions for seven years, and, Captain Norris, I'll guarantee that in less time we'll reach the Pole, and return to our homes, each busily engaged upon a book of 'How I Discovered the North Pole.'"

Norris smiled, but avoided remarks, and shook hands all around; then I took him aside and intrusted him with a letter for old Middleton. I advised Middleton, though arrangements were water-proof, to personally attend to it that ships sailed north every year to meet us. (I knew he would, and spare no expense), and most humbly I begged pardon for breaking my word to him. I could give no excuse except the unknown polar regions fascinated me, and, against reason, at the last moment I joined the expedition. Years later I learned that Middleton, when he received the letter, was thrown into such a state of alarm and anxiety, that he collapsed and took to his bed with a serious illness from which he recovered with great difficulty. I am satisfied Middleton's affection for me was disinterested.

Captain Norris, also his men, were superstitious, and declared they would not invite ill-luck by seeing us off; but the Esquimaux clamored about us, loading us with gifts. One gave Saxe a keg of oil,

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which he stored away with great care; what he wanted with that oil was a mystery. Skins, furs were forced upon us, strings of fresh fish, and a great quantity of dried or frozen fish packed together like staves of a barrel was presented to me. We were each presented with a canoe, with the information that we would need them. Saxe. repaid this kindness with quantities of beads and imitation jewelry, and I flung a little fortune among the natives.

Norris saluted with four guns. The *Propellier* responded with a shrill blast from her siren as we sped out among the snow hills which soon hid all our friends from view. At last we were really started upon our long journey of marvelous adventure.

We traveled north along the coast of Greenland. The *Propellier* acted well, the feeler did splendid work, warning us of breaks or gaps in the ice by vibrating and resounding with hollow noise; the great arc-light cast a radiance of three hundred yards, and we traveled full speed night and day. Each were initiated into the mysteries of the engine-room, and took turns in steering the machine. Saunders, however, was exempt from these duties, he permitted nothing to interfere with the work he'd mapped out for himself. He alone was spared from what is called snow-blindness; with his exception we were all decorated with great blue goggles. I was the first to succumb to the glaring whiteness of the snow. The continual sameness of arctic landscape became very tiresome. As far as

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the eye reached were vast plains of ice and snow, a blinding whiteness in soft, downy hollows and smooth mounds, the earth shrouded in a widening sheet of white velvet; and vividly in the distance with a blue, misty veil, shielding their peaks, was the circular range of ice mountains, that has been declared naught but an optical illusion. All polar explorers have viewed these strange mountains, whose distance is beyond speculation, having always that illusive appearance even at the highest altitudes. Scientists claim this mystic range to be a reflection cast by the heavy, frozen atmosphere. Sheldon was the only one with time to argue about the matter, he agreed with me the illusive range was a solid fact all right, but he went further, declaring they were not polar mountains, and that his great body of fresh water rested——etc. When he reached this stage in his argument my interest flagged. Sheldon and his body of water became very tedious sometimes.

Saxe. was occupied entirely with the *Propellier*, and Saunders altogether absorbed making atmospheric observations. These observations he takes every seven hours, making us lose much valuable time, and rousing Saxe. to caustic remarks; he puts in the rest of the time studying a chart of the heavens and peering at the stars.

Our first mishap occurred at 74-5° north latitude. The *Propellier* was speeding, when suddenly the feeler vibrated, then followed a jarring, crushing sound, and the *Propellier* plunged into a thin layer of ice and snow, and was washed by the swiftly

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flowing black waters underneath. At the first vibration Saxe quickly shut off the current, then with considerable difficulty backed the *Propellier* from her perilous position. We had plunged into a parting or lane, fifteen feet wide and three miles long, concealed by new snow that had iced on the surface, and were obliged to make a wide detour.

Saunders reported a faint aurora borealis in the northeast.

It turned out to be the moon's rays piercing a mackerel-sky. It was a beautiful sight. White shining clouds with antlers branching in long, waving ribbons crimped like blond, which scintillated in diffused patches on the horizon. As we watched the moon sailed high, dimming and scattering the shimmering radiance.

We had the laugh on Saunders, who stubbornly insisted the bright light was a faint aurora. As the heavens are one continual phenomenon, always inspiring mortal with awe, and considering that Saunders knew more of the heavens than any of us, I had a secret belief he might possibly be correct, particularly as we witnessed this phenomenon time after time when there was no moon. The same shining, white clouds, with rippling antlers parting in flaming rays, which stretched across the sky in a broad, throbbing arch, varying in tints of a yellowish, bluish, milky white; all cold, chilly colors, but beautiful.

Saxe became bold over the successful traveling of his machine, and announced it his belief that we would reach the Pole in a month. But difficul-

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ties commenced when we reached 78 degrees north latitude, progress became slow and we were obliged to travel inland to avoid the high winds which threw the snow into insurmountable mounds, forming alley-ways and embankments, and all the time from the north came that ominous warning boom as the ice packed and screwed together. "The Inevitable," as Saxe. called it, and that which has confronted all polar explorers over the Greenland route, happened at 79 degrees.

Further travel was blocked by a chain of small ice hills, so closely packed together they formed a wall, seemingly an impenetrable blockade, extending as far as the sight reached. For several weeks we traveled in an easterly direction, then dared the jagged opening in the shifting chain, which revealed a veritable world of peaks, at sight of which Sheldon blurted out:

"It can't be done, Saxe., old boy!"

But the *Propellier* was invented to crush all obstacles, and Saxe. grimly, cautiously steered through the icy gate. He found it very difficult to operate the engine in this terrible mountainous district. We were upon the frozen surface of the sea, whose waves seemingly had iced as they formed into the swell. We realized danger, but there was no turning back; through extreme caution we were spared disaster. Saxe. never left his post in the little engine car, he refused aid, we were not expert enough for the situation.

Weeks were consumed in passing over this hilly waste, but hundreds of miles were traversed, then

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gradually the ice peaks reared farther apart, juts, waves, smoothened; and we finally ploughed into a far-reaching plain of snow, with the distant horizon cut by the familiar, illusive range of mountains capped with their azure veil. We had reached 87 degrees, and were miles from our original course, but steadily advancing toward the Pole.

“87-5° north latitude, and 175-6° east longitude,” rattled off Saunders. The *Propellier* was put at full speed, but soon slackened as we continually encountered lanes concealed by soft, new snow. So frequent did these partings become the machine was forced to a zig-zag course. It took half a day to make two miles, and when we halted the situation was alarming. The ice was shallow and breaks continual, having the appearance of lakes or rivers, the black, sullen water rippled and flowed with a swift undercurrent. Some of the lanes measured thirty feet in width, and one reached 700 yards in length. We agreed the danger was about equal in turning back or pushing forward; we had nothing to gain in turning back.

Sheldon was nonplussed. He could not account for the swiftly flowing surface streams at 88 degrees. He finally ventured they were not breaks in the ice, but freshets coursing from the north, ploughing their own avenues, and creating one of the phenomenons of the polar sphere. Saunders snickered, but Saxe looked worried.

“A thaw somewhere,” he muttered.

But he was wrong; the cold was intense, and were it not for our superb heating apparatus, the

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pipes extending throughout the cars, we would have been compelled to turn back.; nothing human could live in such temperature. Gradually we dashed free of the freshet bound region and traveled swiftly over a smooth, wide plain without rut or ripple, huge floes of ice packed and screwed together till seemingly one vast floe extended over the whole of this drear unknown continent, and always the same distance away was the blue mystic range of mountains. I wondered if we would ever reach them.

We were making splendid time, gaining on that lost in the mountainous and lake district, yet Saxe. appeared troubled.

"I fear a storm," he told me. "We cannot escape them now, we are nearing the summit."

That night a strange light illuminated the sky.

"An aurora!" shouted Saunders.

Undoubtedly it was, but the beauties of the aurora had paled upon us, yet this night the flaming, brilliant tinted sky held our attention. Awe-inspiring was the vast arch of fire, crown formed, spiked with quivering streamers. The fiery crown varied not in shade, but seemed to burn with deeper intensity as a dull, ominous red clouded some of its brightness. The quivering streamers oscillated with wonderful tints, making each seem as though studded with rare gems. The blood-red ruby glowed upon us, then paled to the amethyst's heliotrope, which faded before the rush of emerald, flooding the sky, and the baleful topaz streaked the delicate green as the flaming arch, edged with the penetrating turquoise, quivered and vibrated with

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darts and flashes. As we watched the gaudy spectacle it seemed to dull, darken, and grow heavier as though gifted with substance, then with indescribable majesty slowly descended to the earth. The heat became intense, the atmosphere stifling. We raised the windows, but quickly closed them, the car filled with a sulphurous air which started us to coughing and sneezing. We glanced at each other silent, dismayed; Saxe., paled and trembling, sank to a seat.

"The *Propellier* will explode! nothing is proof against this!" he cried.

"We are witnessing," said Saunders, in reassuring tones, "a phenomenon of the heavens, a combination of electrical forces which will soon disperse and rage in various portions of the globe. It cannot harm us should it descend, as its power, force, will have evaporated. This portion of the globe upon which we are now traveling is——er——hum——"

"God in heaven!" yelled Saxe. "Look, boys, we're done for!"

Saxe., the mainspring of the party, to our amazement, was overcome with terror.

"Come," he cried, retreating with frantic haste, "come, or we'll perish! The *Propellier* is going to burst!"

We stamped to the rear car and clustered around the window to gaze at that which had so roused Saxe.'s terror, while he sank in a heap, mopping his brow.

The wide spreading arch of fire suddenly parted

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with a great blast of thunder, which rolled and revolved over our heads with terrific crash, then passed on toward the south. What chained our attention was the appearance of a great milk-white cloud that sailed through the parted arch, submerging it. A cloud, funnel shaped, of milky, opal tints, whose throbbing, fiery heart burned vividly beneath the thin, shell covering. It gained in size and weight as it advanced, and gradually losing flakiness became a dull, ominous purple, rapidly deepening to black, then with appalling suddenness it was upon us.

We were among the racing clouds, tossed and scattered by the roaring gale. Thunder boomed, and weird, lightning flashes pierced our car, then the hurricane struck us squarely, lifting, overturning the car, and we were buried beneath the wreck. I was stunned, but a slight scalp wound which bled profusely relieved me greatly. The heat was suffocating, my clothing became saturated with perspiration streaming from every pore of my body.

Saxe was the first to recover and extricated himself from the storage and debris, unhurt but badly scratched, and once more the energetic, pushing old boy we were familiar with.

"The worst is over," he bawled, "and the *Propellier* didn't bust; but snow is falling in clouds—boys, brace up, or we'll be buried alive!"

Sheldon and Saunders squirmed lively after this. We forced our way out of the overturned car and sank waist deep in soft, new snow, which prevented the gale carrying us away. The *Propellier* and ad-

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joining cars were not damaged, the snow having blown up against, and piled high, protecting them almost entirely, but the wind now carried the snow over and down the sides, causing Saxe. to shout: "Hustle, boys, hustle! we'll be buried alive!"

The heaters were filled and fires started; in a short time the waste pipes were letting off streams of steam. We shoveled a bank nearly twelve feet high, which protected us some from the wind, but it flung the snow upon us faster than we could work, and from steam to shovel we labored for our lives against odds for eight long, weary hours. But the storm spent itself, ceased as suddenly as it came, calmed beneath the freezing temperature that descended. The snow iced, our labor was over and we sought shelter, food and rest.

Saunders advised early departure, and two hours later we started. The *Propellier* made a rush up the steep embankment; midway she seemed to lose speed, but suddenly cleared the remaining distance at a bound. The dense atmosphere had lifted and plain upon plain of snow with wind-tossed mounds and hills met our vision, and over it all a crescent moon glistened mystically. The search-light flared and with a shrill blast we speeded northward. Midnight we had reached and traveled beyond the altitude scientists claim the earth's pivot is located. Towards morning a heavy mist fell upon us, a dark, silent, deadly mist, which sent a chill to our bones. I could not shake off the dull feeling of dread that came over me. The *Propellier* glided smoothly, swiftly onward, taking us farther into

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this horrible death-land. The fear that tugged at my heart shamed me to silence. I glanced furtively at my three companions, who were unusually still, and whose faces blanched beneath my scrutiny. Then Saxe suddenly halted the *Propellier*, and addressed us.

"Boys," he said, "we have stood by one another, we are not cowards, but life is life, and the Pole be damned! We have penetrated farther north than man ever dared, we do not fear, but—others felt the same way in much lower altitudes and stampeded to civilization with tales of blizzards, blockades, and the impossibility of life beyond a certain degree. There are unknown dangers ahead, and death sometimes is very slow, and to struggle and dare and have it all end in oblivion, I think senseless. The earth's summit is at 100 degrees. We have entered the mystic circle—just a league to discovery—the *Propellier* at full speed could dash through in a few minutes. We will suffer—an awful experience—a terrible risk; and, as I said before, boys, life is life. I call the expedition off; we will return."

He glanced wistfully at me, but I avoided his eyes. The passion for the myth had for the time evaporated. After all, life is worth the living, the world is full of beauty and harmony if we choose to see it. I fully realized the hazardous undertaking I had ventured upon, and—God in heaven!—I may never return.

Saxe was turning back through anxiety for his friends; were he alone he would crush the dread he

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imagined upon him and push ahead. He forgot the fanaticism of his comrades. Truly they were three of a kind. Saunders sprang forward and caught Saxe's arm.

"Correct! correct!" he cried, "we're not cowards! Why are you turning back? The dread upon us is the dread of nature, the all-pervading fear of first venture, which the will overcomes or we'd still be apes. Determination invites progress, fear checks it; all dread the Unknown. Now, up to 98 or 100 degrees I can state positively what we'll encounter. We've completely traversed the frozen polar sea, from now on it's surface ice and melting snow slushing over brown rocks or earth. At 100 degrees we view the most uncanny scenery man ever gazed upon. Great mountains and steep, smooth cliffs, of petrification; deep, gloomy, barren valleys, horrible in stillness; and lightening up this dead, petrified portion of the globe, is the star, the star I will brave death to see. The foe we have to conquer is atmosphere, science may help, but there is no atmosphere. In advancing we flirt with Death, who'll welcome us with dreadful grandeur, but a bold flirtation does not always end disastrously; we can view the all-mighty magnet, then depart."

"Oh, don't pay any attention to him," interposed Sheldon, "he blunders constantly. If I believed in him I'd favor turning back. For days we've argued this matter; he's merely expressed his views—not facts. I agree with him regarding the petrification of the earth surrounding the Pole, the cold is so intense petrification is natural, but the lack of at-

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mosphere— laughable. From the high altitude undoubtedly we'll suffer, experiencing palpitation, vertigo, and other inconveniences, including a tantalizing thirst. Then again, boys, nature being freakish, we may experience none of these ills, but enjoy the wild, weird scenery of the earth's summit. We'll view the blue Reflection Alps, and drink sparkling, crystal water, from the reservoir of the earth. Onward! Saxe., onward! but—should the *Propellier* cease to work we're dead men."

I listened to the absurd reasoning of my three esteemed friends, realizing I had three fanatics to deal with. Lacking persuasive ability I had to rely upon common sense and plain English to point out the folly of advancing. I had the power to command the expedition off and rose to better emphasize my words, when suddenly the doubts and nervous restlessness calmed in a deep, delicious languor, which overpowered and deadened reason. I made a feeble effort to regain my flying senses, but the soft, warm zephyr, heavy with an unknown, magnetic perfume, drugged my will. In that instant I revelled in dreams, a maze of love ecstasy, my pulse quivered and tingled with delight. I was blind to all danger, prudence vanished before impetuous recklessness and desire. I sank to my seat. "Onward!" I cried hoarsely, with wildly beating heart. "Forward! Saxe., forward!" And I, too, was a fanatic.

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### CHAPTER VII.

The following day we reached 95 degrees, experiencing no discomfort. I awoke from a nap and found the *Propellier* at a standstill, my three interesting friends crowded at the window, gazing out with the liveliest curiosity. I joined them and was astonished to see a strange, large plant, resembling a cactus, about five feet high, with greenish, putrid looking veins tracing through dull, brown leaves—a plant growing wild, vigorous, amidst a vast snow plain! I made for the door, so did Sheldon. As the first breath of air struck me it cut through my lungs like a knife, so intense was the cold, but after I suffered no inconvenience; in fact, the atmosphere was exhilarating, though close and thick, a misty twilight. I approached the odd looking plant, it was icy to the touch, soft and pulpy like liver, with a sticky, moist surface. Saxe., Sheldon and Saunders hurried up, calling the plant various Latin names, to all of which it refused to answer. Then Saxe. took out his knife and cut one of the broad, thick leaves neatly down the middle. A reddish-brown fluid spattered the snow, emitting such a stench that Saxe. dropped that portion he held and the three learned ones bolted for the car.

I watched with interest the cut leaf shriveling up, then placed the severed portion to the cut, making it fit exactly. At once a thin film formed over

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the parting, which gradually thickened into a fine skin and the shriveled leaf became soft and pulpy again with nothing but a faint line to show where the wound had been. Something about the plant nauseated me and I hastily returned to the car to find my three friends in a noisy discussion about it. Saxe. declared it was flesh, not vegetable. Saunders was positive it was a mineral product, and Sheldon frankly told them both they were asses; the plant was vegetable, how could it be anything else?

I never joined in their discussions, it was impossible to convince them of anything. They generally yelled like mad for a few minutes, then each, sure of his superior knowledge of all things, would gradually simmer down and draw out of the argument. And as usual Saxe. rose with that familiar know-it-all-air, and started the *Propellier* going. Sheldon and Saunders continued the debate for hours, in fact, till the plants became so thick and common Sheldon called time.

We seemed to be passing through a forest of brown rubber trees, some attaining a growth of ten feet, whose branches bruised against the car windows, staining them with their foul smelling fluid. The snow was thinning to slush and we jolted fearfully over the rocky, uneven road, but not till we had passed the forest of unearthly plants would Saxe. halt to remove the runners and fit the wheels. When we emerged from the nightmare thicket a rocky territory stretched wide before us, snow and ice traveling were at an end; our course

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appeared to be over the lava bed of a monster crater.

"I was correct!" shouted Saunders and Sheldon simultaneously, while they glared at each other. "I was positive when we reached the summit we would discover the outlet of all equatorial eruptions. We travel upon frozen lava beds, and——"

"Later on," Saxe. cried impatiently; "we have work to do now."

A few minutes later, muffled to the eyes, we trooped out into an atmosphere of stifling cold (no other expression for it) to remove the runners. Frequently I was seized with vertigo, but kept quiet as nobody else complained.

Saunders informed us we had reached 97 degrees north latitude. Three more degrees and we have discovered the Pole.

Saxe. worked, but at the same time watched us keenly, bawling instructions, then wasted a whole hour carefully inspecting our work.

"Can't afford accidents," he explained, "will submit only to the unavoidable;" and wheel after wheel was examined.

We watched him fooling away the time and amused ourselves cutting jokes at his expense, but he was entirely oblivious. Suddenly we were startled by the deep baying of hounds.

"Dogs!" gasped Saxe., "sounds like dogs!"

Saunders streaked it for the car, bawling to us to follow.

Sheldon suggested it might be the Relief Party, at the same time striding mightily for safety. Saxe.

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in his hurry tumbled over himself, and I, horrified, heavy man as he was, picked him up as though he were a child and hurried with him to the car, securing the door just in time. The great beasts rushed towards us and sprang upon either side of the *Propellier*, which shook beneath their weight. Saxe. turned on the siren, the monsters yelled and snapped at the steel, but held on, differing from other animals we had encountered, which, now that I mention the matter, are far from numerous despite the contrary exaggerations written by some arctic tourists. But the few roving animals we did meet renounced all curiosity at the first blast of the siren, which Saxe. now kept going at one continual ear-splitting shriek till the huge beasts finally dropped off and made for the car. What magnificent animals they were, certainly resembling dogs, but assuredly not dogs. Their monstrous bodies were covered with long, thick, white fur, and they dragged great plume-like tails. The immense head was ornamented with ridiculously small, pointed ears, with short, blunt horns growing behind. The larger animal sprang at the window from which we looked and broke it with his horns. He thrust in his great head; how his eyes glared and what awful fangs, and how he snapped and snarled, and strained and worked to lift his great bulk. Saxe. struck him with a piece of iron; with a howl he fell back, tumbling to the ground. I hurriedly took from the shelf two large fish that had been pounded to tenderness and flung them to the enraged beasts. Each grabbed a fish—what transformation! They

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sat on their haunches and regarded us with gratitude—it was gratitude—purely an animal trait.

Sheldon forgot prudence and leaned far out of the window, calling: "Poor fellow!" and "Good dog!" With the fish secure in their teeth they jumped about delighted, wagged their bushy tails, and trotted off contentedly towards the south.

"They were desperate with hunger," I remarked.

"They were not," Saxe. snapped, "they looked well fed, were fat. They feed upon those plants we've just passed, which are flesh, not vegetable. If those dogs, or whatever they are, had been hungry they would have devoured the fish at once."

"If they were not hungry why did they come after us so fiercely?" I asked.

"In our country," Saxe. responded, "we produce every product under the sun, yet we are continually importing foreign stuffs."

This ended the discussion. When he thought it prudent, Saxe. ventured out to finish his interrupted inspection of our work and travel was not resumed till he was thoroughly satisfied.

"Hope we don't run across any more queer animals," he remarked to nobody in particular.

"We won't," Saunders replied, "we are too far up to discover anything but petrification and the Pole."

"We are traveling upon lava beds," Saxe. informed us, "and I believe we are in the pit of a huge crater—what misfortune if it should come to sudden eruption!"

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"Ah, bosh!" sassed Saunders, "crater be blowed! we're traveling upon rocks, petrified earth."

"Nonsense!" bawled Saxe.

"Order, order, boys!" called Sheldon from the tanks where he was brewing quarts of coffee. "In case of necessity," he murmured.

We were prepared for any emergency, the air-pipes were stocked and heaters in good working order. I was busy putting in a new pane of glass in the damaged window, when I heard Saxe. say he saw cliffs ahead and heard a roaring sound. I heard a roaring sound also, but it was rush of blood to the head and I was attacked with a violent hemorrhage. But I soon recovered under Sheldon's excellent treatment, which was smoking hot coffee. My three comrades suffered intensely from nausea, but each remained at his post. Saxe. guiding the *Propellier*, Saunders ever alert for his star, and Sheldon at the coffee stand serving out regular instalments, with the encouraging words: "It's the best and only stimulant we can take."

Though the air valves were opened wide, creating a slight draught, it seemed heavy with drugs. Drowsiness was overpowering, and though sleep meant death the eye-ball ached with weariness, yet we managed to keep each other awake, but eventually endured a siege of suffocation that was agonizing in the futile attempt to take a long breath, the gurgling effort leaving a heavy, suppressed pain in the lungs. We were tortured with every stage of suffocation except the last one—death. There was a thin streak of life in the atmosphere. It took an

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hour to pass the danger zone, yet not once did we think of turning back.

"Forward! forward!" always was the cry.

"We're too expert, it's got to be stronger to swamp us," Saxe. declared, and Sheldon has since expressed great faith in "Determination, grim determination." And during the trying time, possibly for the encouragement of everybody, including themselves, both aired very grand, lofty ideas about "will-vitality," etc. I listened admiringly, but gradually lost interest, and in spite of heroic efforts succumbed to a stupor of weariness. I was dulled, not unconscious, and distinctly saw Saxe., for all his high-faluting "will-vitality," turn livid as he slid from his seat. He was gasping, and limply moved his arms for assistance. For the life of me I could not move, seemed tied as in a nightmare. Sheldon flung the doors and windows wide, then rushed to Saxe.'s assistance, who had fainted for the first time in his life. The icy blast that swept through the car brushed the cobwebs from my brain and thoroughly chilled the treacherous lethargy from us all. But it took some time to recover from that "high air pressure," and we had considerable trouble with Saxe., who took to his bunk.

Saunders's predictions were correct, only reversed. He declared the atmosphere of the unknown circle to be charged with deadly gases (no atmosphere), but up to the danger line we would encounter brisk, icy winds. For upward of an hour we faced the "no atmosphere" problem, but within

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the Pole circle brisk, icy breezes blew life to us—no one dared mention the fact to Saunders.

Sheldon served around hot, fragrant coffee, and suggested lunch. When the meal was ready Saxe. had sufficiently recovered to join us and felt so invigorated after that he proposed we venture out and prospect. We advised against it, of course, but Saxe. was known never to take advice, and we might as well talk to the *Propellier*.

We discovered a broad plain stretching east to west to an infinite distance, but straight ahead the road continued as though leveled from the side of the mountains. Upon one side huge cliffs towered and upon the other deep, unfathomable chasms. The boulders were perpendicular and of glassy smoothness. A terrific gale was blowing, dark clouds scurried across the sky with occasional breaks, letting a star gleam through, and once a wide space cleared and the moon shone full, lighting up the strange, weird, beautiful scenery.

"If this is the dead portion of the earth, then death is certainly grand, sublime," remarked Sheldon.

"According to the compass," interrupted Saxe., whose mind apparently was not upon the scenery, "we must travel straight ahead, and that narrow road in front is the route. I judge it's about fifteen feet wide," he continued, "inclines sharply, curving into the cliffs down there. We must know what's around that bend before we go splurging with the machine."

We started down the narrow road, but the cut-

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ting ice wind chilled us to the heart and we huddled together with a distinct desire to avoid moving. "We'll petrify if we remain stationary," warned Saunders, "keep moving. But it's not as frigid as it should be at this altitude. It's the atmosphere and earth—"

Saxe. grunted and rushed ahead; we quickly followed, glad of anything to squelch Saunders, who once started upon his hobby was good for days. His language was eloquent, his subject always learned and instructive, and in a nice, warm room, we could have all gone comfortably to sleep, but in an atmosphere of ice, with the Pole almost in sight. . . . We reached the perilous bend in the road, it was engulfed in deep, black shadows, cast by cliffs above, but farther on re-appeared, stretching along the level for miles and miles, curving, undulating, like a gigantic serpent, and gleaming like silver in the strange light, neither night nor day.

"It was once the bed of a river," remarked Sheldon, who, like Saunders, was daft on his hobby.

"Nonsense!" retorted Saxe., "it's the main artery of a burnt-out volcano."

"Volcano in the frigid zone!" laughed Sheldon.

We returned to the *Propellier*, tired out and panting heavily, the exertion made us perspire freely after a few seconds' rest. Saxe. was anxious to push forward at once. We voted consent. He flared the search-light upon the road and the *Propellier* cautiously started down the incline. Up hill and down into deep, black hollows, we sped like the

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wind and very little level was there to this river-bed, artery, or whatever it was. Ever to our right were smooth, high cliffs, and to the left unfathomable mist shrouded valleys. The wild, uncanny scenery, magnetic in its monstrous, powerful unreality, chained the attention. Granite, granite, mighty boulders reared to stupendous height, casting shadows that stretched to the impenetrable, blue mist, shielding mysterious chasms. Vegetation? God! Vegetation in this dreadful place with its dull, horrible, mucky atmosphere? It was like a nightmare, awe-inspiring, firing the imagination.

Dread silenced us, an intangible fear made our hearts flutter, and we looked forward at any moment to what? It seemed we were among the damned. Unmerciful, unjust, is the punishment inflicted upon the erring, condemned to wander forever aimlessly alone in this terrible shadow-land. It is hell—if there is a hell.

Sheldon came and sat beside me.

“Going at a pretty good rate,” he said. “Not far from the Pole. Saunders informs me we’re at 99 degrees north latitude with some figuring to the west and some minutes thrown in for luck. Great chap Saunders! Saxe is reckless to be rid of this place, the car is rocking enough to cause sickness, and not far off the road curves sharply. Wonder if he intends to risk it and go ahead.”

“Good heavens! Sheldon,” I gasped, “suppose the road ends there!”

“No, it doesn’t,” he quickly assured me, “I can see it farther on, but it widens and changes alto-

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gether, seems to wind down into the valley. We will certainly reach the Pole, very soon—then what?"

"And then what?" I repeated.

"Saxe, says Asia is on the other side. He intends to make the return trip through Asia, declares he wouldn't pass this way again for millions. And say, Sally," he whispered confidentially, "we might as well come out in the open and state what we came up here for. None of us have been fooled as to the other's intentions and secretly worked in search of the object, to wit: *The other side of the earth*. Saxe, raves of the Pole, but did not work years upon the *Propellier* merely to travel to the highest northern altitude with it. Saunders pretends to be daft about his star, yet every astronomer in the world is aware of the existence of that star. It is not the star he wishes to discover, but that portion of the world it sparkles upon. And the great reservoir of fresh water is certainly not bubbling in the polar zone. But you, Sally, you have deceived no one. Boy, you mutter continually in your sleep and the passionate murmurs could never be roused by a star, a country, or a man. An exquisite vision, an alluring phantom has fired you—a woman, by Jove!" He nudged me. "The woman on the other side of the globe. We know all about it. That's why you joined the expedition and fooled poor old Middleton, at the last."

I gasped. Chuckling and winking, he left me. And my secret had been known all along, commented upon, and undoubtedly they joshed me

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among themselves. I felt odd for the second, then laughed the silliness away. Sheldon attempted to astonish Saxe. and Saunders as he had me, but they were ready for him and foreclosed. Then we all came "out in the open," and had an eager consultation about the undiscovered country we expected to find. Each had theories which of course were different and superior to the other's, but upon one point we all agreed—there was another side to this globe, figuratively speaking, a new world.

Columbus believed the "land where the sun set" to be a continuation of Asia, a new continent did not occur to him. We are more bigoted than people of those days. Superficial knowledge and science declares the earth orange shaped, divided into two hemispheres, with a handful of islands to cap the dejeuner. This vast globe never was and never will be fully explored. There are continents upon continents, teeming with civilization, I believe, vastly superior to our own with one exception—their world, like ours, does not extend any farther than their knowledge, otherwise they would have discovered us.

As we neared the sharp curve in the road Saxe. slackened speed and cautiously steered around it into a steep, narrow lane, partially obscured by elongated shadows. The search-light revealed the road widening farther on, then the cliffs ended abruptly, and we speeded over a level, low country, one of those valleys that seemed so mysterious. A strong wind came up and whistled around the car, and upon it was borne the roar and boom of some far

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distant ocean. We dashed through the valley which was filled with death-like odors, up a steep mountain path, and were once more on the old familiar road, banked with cliff and precipice. Saxe. vowed we traveled in a circle, but the atmosphere suddenly cleared, the heavy mists floated upwards, and the black chasms we took for valleys were but a continuation of cliffs and ceaseless hills backed with a dismal vista of rugged plains, fringed by a lofty range of black mountains capped with a strange, soft glow.

“We are nearing the summit,” Saxe. told us; “if the road continues like this we should reach it in an hour.”

We reached the North Pole in less than an hour. The road we had followed so faithfully gradually zigzagged to the summit of a precipitous mountain, then parted abruptly at the sharp lip of a deep, unfathomable pit. The view was magnificent, grand, diabolical, and in the strange half light fantastic shadows seemed to dance and beckon. Our route gleamed like a silver thread as it widened through the valley beneath to be submerged in far distant ice and snow fields. And down in the deep, black mountain pit, surrounded by high walls of shining petrification, was the ocean, whose roar had so puzzled us. An ocean? A wide pool of dark, glassy substance, without ripple or disturbance, yet the roar blared, deafening, like a great horn.

“Any amount,” said Sheldon, “that water down there is hot.”

“Won’t take your bet,” Saxe. answered, “but it’s

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hot all right, it's lava—don't care to investigate. But, gentlemen," he suddenly exclaimed, "gentlemen, gentlemen, we have discovered the Pole!"

We gave three rousing cheers; the echo was like a thousand voices.

Saunders, after taking observations, told us we had reached 100 degrees north latitude. Time, 5.20 A. M.

"Onward!" cried Saxe.

But Sheldon called our attention to the sudden disturbance in the black waters below. Even as he spoke we heard a sizzling, bubbling sound, and a great column of water shot upward hundreds of feet, falling with tremendous roar; then another column mightier than the first rolled upward, while the mountain quaked to the detonation.

"Onward!" shouted Saxe.

The *Propellier* shot down the side of that quivering mountain like a rocket. Looking back I saw column after column of fiery, steaming substance boil upward in rapid succession. With lightning speed we got out of the vicinity of that strange pool with its marvelous geyser-like action, and did not slacken up till we were miles away; then—glory be to glory! we had reached the North Pole, and passed it.

## CHAPTER VIII.

Saxe. vehemently declared he would perish before traveling that route again.

"We would never find it," Saunders interrupted.

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"The crater is in constant eruption, heaving new mountains, leveling new valleys, and utterly obliterating the monster fissures we traveled upon. I knew of the danger, but we were determined to reach the Pole. A burnt-out volcano, Saxe! Ye gods, that we escaped is miraculous! Literally, we traveled over an ocean of fire, an egg-shell between. Had faith in the *Propellier*'s speed, but—I say, boys, look back at the earth's summit!" It looked like a monstrous explosion, great masses of rock flying in all directions, while column after column of fire belched to the sky, then poured in torrents down the mountain side, a flood of boiling, seething lava. We were miles from the volcano, but the fiery sea seemed spreading with appalling rapidity, and Saxe. kept the *Propellier* at high speed till the great barren mountains, and awful chasms of the mighty polar volcano, were dimly outlined in the distance, and upon a broad level plain we sped to wide fields of virgin snow. Late in the afternoon we halted long enough for Saunders to take observations. He reported the temperature fallen two degrees, and wanted to know if we had noticed it. Saxe., who had a vivid imagination, began a speech about the sudden vigor he experienced, but Saunders called our attention to the sky.

"The most remarkable phenomenon man ever witnessed!" he exclaimed.

The filmy gray clouds parted, giving us a flash of brilliant, blue sky. A dull-red ball glided into view, casting a roseate glow with long streamers of penetrating light which fell upon us, sending a warmth

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through our bodies we had not felt for months; then the clouds rolled together, but far in the distance the great red ball blazed; it flew downward, bounded and bounced over mountain and plain, disappearing, to re-appear, remained stationary an instant, then swinging into space with a flash it bounded out of sight. The phenomenon lasted seven minutes. "It is the Sun," Saunders explained, "and touches this point once a month."

Sheldon aired his doubts of course, and suggested the "wonderful sun-lit appearance" merely a reflection or another of Saunders's fake auroras. But he (Sheldon) honestly believed this "atmospheric exhibition" a deep, Simon-pure aurora at last. Then the argument was on which lasted for hours, and though they were really fond of each other, the energy displayed for flinging out insults without coming to blows was about as wonderful as the Sun visiting the polar regions once a month.

During the night we escaped from the shadowy quarry-land, and light as a bird skimmed over the old, familiar plains of ice and snow.

Saxe began making calculations; we never interfered with him, he delighted in figuring out just how long it would take the *Propellier* to cover this or that distance, and as his calculations always went wrong we didn't bother him. Sheldon and Saunders suddenly became very busy and pre-occupied, and for no particular reason we all grew much elated and nervous with energy. Saunders said it was the atmosphere, and the farther we advanced in the vigor-producing air the livelier we would

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become. We certainly were very jubilant and chatted in excited consultation over the great progress made during that week, when a sudden sharp, whizzing sound, coming from the *Propellier* warned us of disaster. The machine stopped with a jerk, the cars banged together and we were thrown from our feet, then with a dying spurt the doomed *Propellier* bounded forward. In panic we bolted from the car, but did not escape entirely, though we suffered little injury. The four of us were hurled high in the air by the explosion; one, two, three, like cannonading, then all was quiet, and Saxe.'s life-work, his brilliant invention, was destroyed. Destruction was complete.

Saxe. ran around the wreck wringing his hands, muttering incoherently. The top of the *Propellier* was blown clean away, the cylinders torn wide open, and the diamond prod had shot up in the air with such force that apparently it never came down again. We were unable to find it. Both cars were overturned, one entirely wrecked, but the other was hardly damaged and was to be our sole future conveyance.

We tried to be cheerful, but Saxe. took it hard and considerable time was wasted humoring him; he obstinately believed he could do something with his wrecked machine. We righted the last remaining car and stored everything in it that escaped the explosion; then we buried the *Propellier*, and courageously formed new plans.

It seemed easier and wiser to advance, so the word was: "Forward!" We hauled the car in

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pairs, changing every two hours: Saxe. and Saunders, Sheldon and myself. It would never do to yoke Sheldon and Saunders together, they would consume all steam in argument.

We traveled under great difficulties, and the outlook was anything but encouraging. Our heating, cooking apparatus had gone up in the explosion, and our store of prepared stuffs limited; but we trudged along with mighty determination.

Grit is as rare as genius, and the foundation of every lofty aspiration; those possessing the magic power, accomplish all desire, no matter how wild; but few comprehend, and still less realize, which accounts for a world overflowing with nondescript.

We suffered terrible hardships, but were spared a repetition of partial suffocation. A sudden new vigor roused energy, ambition, we could travel leagues without the slightest fatigue. Even the inevitable blockade, though formidable, could not weaken our courage.

The noise was deafening as the ice packed and screwed together, layer upon layer into huge blocks, constantly breaking and shifting, then piling up again into insurmountable cliffs and peaked, drawfed mountains, wedged closely, with occasional gaps or alleyways.

We forced onward, making little headway, some days none at all, and once to our dismay discovered we were traveling north again. Then disaster settled upon us. We strayed far from our course and were lost in this dreary, ice world, wandering for days in a circle.

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Almost impenetrable obstacles constantly blocked us; the tedious climbing, cutting steps in ice boulders, then hoisting and hauling the car, the descent into dangerous, curving, lane-crevices, with the constant fear of ice wedging together and crushing us, and once we barely escaped just clearing the treacherous parting when the cliffs above caved in, piling high in the opening. The exhausting weeks of profitless travel harrowed us to desperation, and I cursed my folly in joining the expedition. We seemed hopelessly, irretrievably lost. With the exception of myself all suffered some ailment. Saxe. lost two fingers, the frozen members had to be amputated. Saunders had an attack of scurvy, which I treated successfully, but could not cure permanently. I consoled and advised the pair to rest easy. Sheldon thought we could manage with frequent stoppages, but he soon joined his unhappy comrades, very seriously hurt. Trudging along, his mind thousands of miles away, presumably upon the illusive body of water, he calmly stepped in a rugged new parting, falling his length and breaking his ankle. I set the bones but Sheldon was laid up two months and would carry a game leg the rest of his life. He was keen with energy and accomplished much during his imprisonment. He started a map of the new continent, and out of the debris collected from the lost *Propellier* fashioned a queer concern which he called a stove. Saxe. mixed some mysterious ingredient with the oil the Esquimaux gave him and produced a fluid that burned, but—stink! Still it threw out consider-

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able heat and we managed a little cooking. This comfort lifted some of the gloom, we became more cheerful and affairs seemed to take a sudden boom, but we wandered five months in confusion and misery, then at last, through the merest trail, discovered an outlet from this icy hell. Birds sailed above, monstrous feathered creatures, shrieking and flapping their huge wings as though to attract attention. Later, a great flock like an enormous black cloud, sailed over diagonally in a southerly direction. We decided to follow the birds, possibly it was death, but in the present predicament, death was a certainty. Cautiously, persistently we advanced, slowly conquering our awful difficulties. This encouraged us, and congratulating each other, we redoubled our efforts, and in three weeks were freed of the hellish blockade. We yelled, mad with joy, and looked upon the grandest sight man ever viewed. Before us an interminable expanse of ocean, whose waters were the clearest, most limpid green, with billows soaring mountain high, crested with the most delicate tracery of foaming lace, yet the strength, suction contained in those voluminous waves was terrifying, magnificent, seeming to increase with monstrous power as though to engulf the universe. Far to the north was the stifling, frozen world, and from the vast unit giant floes constantly broke and parted to be borne swiftly southward by the powerful current. And to the south as far as the eye reached, this mighty ocean roared and boomed in superb grandeur and solitude, banked by a level coast of ice and snow. We

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followed the coast line. Saxe indulged in calculations, figuring that with even travel we should be rid of this "infernal snow region" in about eight weeks. He informed us this great body of water was a continuation of the Arctic ocean, and we had been traveling all along over its petrified, or frozen surface; it was his opinion that at present we were drifting southward upon a huge floe. Possibly he believed this, but I have always thought he wished to excite Saunders, who had been unusually silent of late. Sheldon, wide-awake and understanding, suggested we had doubled on our tracks and were now invading an undiscovered portion of Greenland. It occurred to him (Sheldon) there was something familiar about the scenery.

But Saunders wouldn't bite, and muttered something to the effect that he "didn't give a d—." Sheldon chuckled knowingly.

We discovered seal and walrus in enormous numbers, great fellows sprawling over rocks and icy beach; they stared at us in astonishment, possibly wondering what species we might be. Farther down the coast we fell in with birds—birds by the million. Undoubtedly they belonged to the sea-gull family, but resembled storks, with plumage varying from gray to white. Great birds of solemn mien, they would form in line right to the water's edge and stand there upon one leg for hours. We never found out what they were waiting for, and our approach did not disturb them. I firmly believe that strong regimental line was formed merely for slum-

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ber. They were easily captured and when cooked and spiced were good eating, tender, palatable; though the second bird convinced us the first was sufficient. Their eggs we found in great quantities, in size and flavor much the same as duck eggs, and vastly superior to the birds. But we lived principally upon fish. Such fish! Great speckled beauties, with a flavor—ah!

All are expert in some particular culinary preparation. Saxe. was magnificent in saute; he could saute anything and you were thankful to be alive and enjoy. Sheldon was the only man in the world who could broil a steak properly; and Saunders excelled in salads, and potato pancakes. I cooked fish. Dropping them alive in boiling oil of sufficient quantity for them to swim in. It is the way to cook fish. Spared from my millions I would have been a famous chef.

We traveled inland to avoid the furious coast gale, and sighted a huge polar bear tracking it for the north. He spied us about the same time, and after intently watching our calisthenics, veered around and stealthily followed us, at times disappearing altogether, then unexpectedly bobbing into view again with the distance between us shorter. Though we puzzled him he finally wearied of tame sport and suddenly rushed us, determined to investigate. Saxe., alert, aimed carefully. He was a prize shot, and it was all over instantly—we enjoyed some excellent steaks.

We encountered numerous packs of the strange

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horned animal. They traveled in flocks like sheep, and had a well-fed appearance, though what they fed upon was a mystery. They did not attack us, merely surrounded the car, sniffing curiously. These flocks finally became so numerous we gave up the rush for the car every time we saw them approaching and made friends instead. They invariably surrounded us, but we patted and played with them, receiving responsive barks while they frantically wagged their great bushy tails. They were dogs, a strange new species, but dogs. Where did they come from? Where were they going? and to whom did they belong?

Saxe. advised us to be prepared for any emergency, reminding us our adventures were just beginning, to expect all manner of wonders—we had reached the other side of the world.

The wretched, murky atmosphere, damp with treacherous fog, gradually lifted, and yesterday, for the first time in months, we caught a glimpse of the sun as it shone fitfully through breaks in the dull, leaden sky. The wind suddenly became warmer, relaxing the icy chill from our quivering muscles, and like a sip from the elixir of life, affected us strangely with something wonderfully new that each experienced, but no power on earth could force us to acknowledge, yet silently, thankfully, we realized.

Sheldon and Saunders became very springy and chirrupy, and resumed their arguments. Saxe.'s stooped frame straightened, his face flushed health-

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fully, his eyes brightened. It made me happy to see the old buoyancy of the trio returning. And this powerful vitality coursing through my veins roused to flame the smouldering, ardent desires, that had led me so far astray. My heart beat joyously, vigorous, lusty, unconsciously I gloried in my erect, muscular physique. I loved—loved life.

Hope spurred ambition, each because powerfully intent upon his particular hobby. Saunders was on the alert for the wonderful star that failed to appear. Sheldon voiced for the thousandth time his opinion concerning his great body of fresh water, stating positively that it rested in the hollow of the highest peak in the universe, which peak he had still to locate, as Saxe. continually reminded him. Saxe., in his pride, became rather arrogant. He was the only one who had succeeded. He discovered the North Pole, and the other side of the earth, and naturally gave himself airs, confidentially telling me the "boys" were doomed to disappointment because of their vague, nonsensical beliefs, and researches after the impossible. He advised me to spruce up and quit worrying about "that female," who would prove only a "digger," if we ever did find her, which he thought very, v-e-r-y doubtful.

He tantalized Sheldon out of his usual good nature, who testily advised Saxe. to curb his steep assurance as he had still to prove we were not traveling in Asia. Nothing roused Saxe.'s ire more than to hint that this new portion of the globe was Asia. The dispute lasted hours and once nearly came to blows, but Saunders interfered with a re-

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markable theory of his own which, after the first surprise, threw the belligerents into spasms of laughter.

Then Saunders discovered his star, or thought he did.

Sheldon and I had turned in, after hauling the greater part of the day, when wild shouting outside startled us. We sprang up in alarm, thinking we were attacked by animals or savages, and rushed to the rescue.

Saxe., open-mouthed, was gazing heavenward, and Saunders, crazy with excitement, bounced up and down like a rubber ball, gesticulating wildly. The stars sparkled brilliantly in the soft, deep-blue twilight sky, but right above us a great globe of light burned red, swinging in the atmosphere as though attached to a gigantic pendulum.

"It's the star!" gasped Saunders. "My God, the star!"

"It flashed there suddenly," echoed Saxe. "The sky cleared shortly after you turned in and we were star gaping when that thing burst into view like a meteor."

I knew it wasn't a star, but kept quiet. To air opinions is the worst policy. I never make a noise unless invited.

We examined the great light through the telescope.

Saunders, disappointed and perplexed, at last admitted it was not a star, and he'd be d——d if he could make out what it was.

Through the telescope the "star" had curious-

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shaped shadows surrounding it, which served to puzzle us more.

Saxe. said it looked like the search-light of the lost *Propellier*.

Sheldon snickered, and suggested it was a signal from the Relief Expedition. The Pole was still to be discovered, and we were lost wandering around our own side of the earth.

Sporty old Saxe. nodded approval.

“Quite right,” he replied. “I agree with you. That light up there is a signal of some sort, possibly of searchers. But we’ve crossed the Pole all right, yet of late I’ve been thinking if we could discover a new route it would be wise to turn back. Earth and the moon are similarly degenerating—we have discovered the dead portion of our globe. As provisions are giving out it occurs to me the situation is becoming embarrassing.”

Sheldon looked uncomfortable and contrite, death was preferable to him than turning back without discovering his fresh water ocean.

Saxe. nagged him unmercifully, but eventually they shook hands, then again we turned our attention to the fiery globe above. While we indulged in side arguments Saunders had been intently studying the great light, but could give no satisfactory explanation as to its business up among the stars. Saxe. suggested we signal to it and hurriedly began searching among the storage, at last finding, packed near the roof, a narrow, oblong box, containing rockets, which had been secreted in our luggage as a joke. “FOR THE PURPOSE OF OC-

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CASIONALLY LETTING THE RELIEF PARTY KNOW YOUR LOCATION" was written neatly on a card inside the box.

"Old Jordan's trick," muttered Saxe., while I aired my suspicions that the powder had become damp or something equally mysterious had happened to it—there is always something wrong with rockets.

Saxe. scowled, but signified his intention of sending up rockets just to see what effect they would have upon that red globe.

"For," he concluded, "it is not a star, nor a moon, nor a sun. It is nothing belonging to the heavens."

We trooped out, each armed with a rocket, then at the signal simultaneously up they whizzed, bursting with the report into varied-hued sparks and descending in the usual golden shower. The effect upon the bright globe was startling. Like a shot it flashed across the sky, tinging a long, filmy, roseate path; small, and smaller it grew, then vanished in space. Though still mystified we were satisfied with the experiment. The next day dawned clear, warm. Towards noon the heat became so intense we were forced to give up travel till evening. Saxe. and Saunders had covered seven miles during the night, and we made two in the early morning; consequently were nine miles from the point of the phenomenon. We decided to wait a reasonable length of time for its reappearance, and consumed the entire day in arguments. I was thankful when evening approached. Eagerly we scanned

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the heavens, the stars came out bright and clear, but nothing unusual occurred. Saunders informed us the same phenomenon never appeared twice. Patiently we waited and watched till near midnight, then, disappointed and angry over the delay, hurriedly pushed on, when we were startled by the sudden appearance of four great globes of light flaming just above us.

"Hoo-ray! hoo-ray!" yelled Sheldon. "Whatever it is, it signals to us. We sent up four rockets and they respond with four balls of fire. What'll we do with 'em?"

Saxe. rushed to the car, returning with rockets and sent them up himself, but their small light faded in the flood of fire that burst from those brilliant globes. The stars vanished as the sky tinged to a fiery sea, flames forked and twisted, seeming to gather volume, and in a second turned to a thousand different hues. It was magnificent!

Gradually the fire dimmed, the stars twinkled richly in the pinkish glow and the four globes above swayed gently. Then they descended nearer the earth while a greenish, blue flame darted from each, floating upon the air like a great ribbon, the color deepening as the four ends joined, then formed into loops and circles, and in the second a word blazed across the sky.

"Centauri!" I gasped.

"Centauri!" my three friends exclaimed.

My head grew light.

"Centauri," I murmured. "I saw it."

"I should think you did," Saxe. cried. "We all

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saw it. I infer we are traveling in the land of Centauri."

"Behind each flaming globe," muttered Saunders, who was unusually pale, "I saw long, dark shadows of very solid appearance. They are planets signaling to us."

"Planets be d——d!" roared Saxe. "They were four balloons with great electric search-lights. Boys, this side of the earth is inhabited, and they are far ahead of us when it comes to fireworks."

"Yes, and fond of airing themselves and their fancied superiority, like the rest of us," agreed Sheldon. "Therefore they're human. Whee! for Centauri!"

### **CHAPTER IX.**

Urged by curiosity we traveled steadily night and day. Saunders scanned the heavens nightly for a reappearance of the brilliant globes, and incidentally his star, but discovered nothing except the atmosphere was gradually clearing, and the filmy twilight heralded a beautiful, crescent moon, whose silvery, mystic rays pierced the lifting northern vapors. Sparse vegetation greeted us as we advanced, and we ran across an odd, stunted plant, bearing a beautiful, crimson blossom, which threw out a sickly-sweet odor, and shriveled up, turning black the instant it was plucked. These vivid ice blossoms dotted the snow desert profusely as the climate grew warmer.

We halted upon the crest of a hill to survey the

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surrounding country, which was almost submerged in a thick, floating, blue mist; but gradually this vapor sea lifted, compact like a monstrous lid, and we viewed a vast expanse of velvety whiteness; but beyond—far, far beyond, though real—we feasted our eyes upon the loveliest country God ever created. We cheered the beautiful scene, and marveled at the stupendously lofty mountains, whose azure peaks pierced the clouds. Vast plains and valleys stretched wide, crossed and re-crossed with serpentine, silvery lines, and to the west, glimmering white, expansive, was a great body of water, an ocean. Through the glasses the mountains showed up, thickly covered with forest, a glorious, verdant land, richly seamed with sparkling streams, a wondrous land shading into golden lights, a paradise—superb Centauri!

Before we could look our fill upon this lovely promise of the future the thick vapors descended, veiling all.

In our eagerness we went off our feed, consequently gained mightily in speed. Soon we cleared the polar mists, the evenings grew deeper, darker, the stars shone brilliantly, startlingly near and large. Then one night, toward the death hour of twelve, far in the east a strange opaline light slowly glided into view. A pear-shaped disc, lusterless like a monster pearl, of a pale pink, mystic color. High in the heavens it sailed—Saunders had at last discovered his star.

He pointed to it, pale, trembling, vainly striving to control his emotion.

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"It is at the full," he murmured. "Pinkish-hued, egg-shaped, as I insisted, contrary to all scientific statements. Gentlemen, behold the planet Virgilius!"

We gave three cheers for the planet Virgilius. (Saunders and myself both gloried in the name of Virgilius.)

We knew the old boy was happy and congratulated him, then viewed the mystery through the telescope. It rose higher, glimmering in pale splendor, weird, unnatural, as it flared in uncanny, pinkish light, without sparkle or brilliancy. Through the telescope the belated star was a disappointment. Partially obscured in spiral nebula, it appeared to be in the liquid state, yet at intervals flared clear, revealing vertical bars of piercing, phosphorous light.

Saunders launched into a learned, very scientific explanation, which the discussive Sheldon prolonged far into the night.

The planet Virgilius was a "stellar apparition," a "solar phenomenon," and the farther south we advanced the more vivid would the rose light glow. Nine moons circled this singular planet, which revolved through space in the same sphere directly opposite our "solar globe."

Saunders lectured volubly, but the learned atmosphere evaporated the instant he and Sheldon attempted an estimate of the distance between the planet Virgilius and Earth. Saxe joined in the argument, shouting: "Unfathomable!" When the noise quieted I mildly suggested the dull-hued star might possibly be a moon. This startling announce-

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ment, after Saunders's deep explanations, actually deprived my friends of speech, and I hurriedly explained my reasons for condemning the great planet Virgilius to the zodiacal insignificance of a moon, and a mighty little moon at that. I blundered along, as people will who grapple with a subject too heavy for them, but Saunders seemed overwhelmed at my brilliancy. Saxe. scowled frightfully, and Sheldon played peekaboo. I grew choleric; though my knowledge of astronomy was certainly limited, my theory concerning the pink, flickering star, was as rational as theirs, and so I frankly told them. They laughingly agreed, and Saxe. called the argument off by yawningly reminding us it was long past midnight, and suggested we turn in and rest the few remaining hours of darkness.

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Overwearied from the long day's march, restlessly I tossed, enviously listening to the measured breathing of my slumbering comrades and vaguely turning over in my mind the advisability of rising. I was determined to rise, though occasional lapses of memory made it difficult to resume thinking about it precisely where I left off; still with heroic efforts I managed to strive along till quite suddenly I drowsily wondered why I worried so much over nothing in particular.

I had been dozing but a short time, it seemed, when slightly roused by a vague, uneasy, persistent impression something unusual was going on. Dreamily I became aware of stealthy movements

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and whispers within the car and, believing it was morning, sleepily wondered what the fuss was about, but my eyes flew wide as a hand suddenly grasped my shoulder, gently shaking me, and Saxe bent over, his fingers upon his lips.

"Get up!" he whispered. "We're surrounded!"

"Surrounded by what?" I gasped.

"I don't know," he answered. "They look like men—inhabitants of this side. Get up!"

I sprang from my bunk, my three friends were armed to the teeth and prepared for the worst. Sheldon stood upon a packing box, peeking through the ventilator and beckoned me up beside him. He edged away, giving me his place, and I looked upon a remarkable scene. We were surrounded.

A band of men numbering over a hundred, stood in groups or tramped around the car, silent, all intently watching the windows.

Great, swarthy fellows, of magnificent physique, delicate-featured as the East Indian. What made Saxe doubt they were men?

Enormous horned dogs were harnessed to many odd-looking conveyances. In one, seated among luxurious furs, a man rested whose piercing eyes never wandered from the car. Occasionally he gave an order, and from the alert attitude and obsequious manner of the others, I judged he was their chief. Suddenly he raised his eyes to the ventilator and gazed straight into mine; he seemed to smile; I caught a flash of white teeth as I sank from view. Sheldon laughed at my precipitancy.

"One of them spied me!" I gasped.

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"That's nothing," he assured me; "that fellow in the sleigh has spied every one of us in turn; you're the last; by this time I guess he's aware of the number of our band."

Then he buoyed us up by elegantly expressing his belief that "we'd about reached the last coil," and advised us to "wiggle around," and find out what the "tribe" outside wanted. He couldn't understand why the "savages" didn't attack us.

Saxe. braced up and declared he would step out and inquire what he could do for the "dusky boys." To avoid argument he unbarred the door at once and we all trooped out to the platform.

Our sudden appearance startled the strangers who stared in round-eyed wonder, while the man in the sleigh sprang out and hurried forward, scanning us with the liveliest interest. We were not behind in that matter but nodded, he responding with a sweeping bow. Saxe. held out his hand, the other grasped and shook it heartily, then glanced smilingly at us. We nodded again in our friendliest manner. The whole band saluted.

"By George! the Relief Party after all," Sheldon muttered.

The leader indulged in graceful pantomime, pointing to the north, indicating he knew we came from there, and apparently he considered we had accomplished a wonderful feat. He pressed his hand to his heart and, saluting, waved toward the south, from which we inferred he had appointed himself our escort; and if everything was as agreeable as appearances, then we had struck clover.

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Saxe. thanked the gentleman—in English. The chief threw out his hands and looked anxious. Saxe. tried again in German, then Italian, French, Spanish, and finally in Latin. Our dusky friend listened attentively, seeming to catch at a word or two of the Latin, then replied in the most musical language I ever heard, similar to Latin; but we were all Latin scholars and could not understand a word. We invited him to enter the car. He complied graciously, first giving orders to his men, which they obeyed with alacrity, and sleighs and dogs were prepared for action.

“We shall figure as the chief attraction at a barbecue,” murmured Sheldon, as the car began moving, jolting fearfully with the unaccustomed rapidity. “Depend upon it,” he continued, “that old tom-cat over there is purring till the ripe moment, then presto! the world will come to an end.”

The swift motion of the car and the thought of the tremendous advance we were making inclined me to be skeptical of Sheldon’s barbecue, though possibly he was correct. Saxe. was doing his level best to make himself understood to the “tom-cat,” who in turn was equally anxious to be understood, and seemed greatly astonished at everything he saw in the car. After awhile he managed to convey to us two important facts, to wit: His name was Potolili, chief of the Potolili tribes, and we were six hundred years behind the times.

“Nonsense, he’s making sport of us,” muttered Sheldon, who was busy brewing his favorite coffee.

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"Six hundred years behind the times, are we? I'll wager he never tasted coffee."

Saxe declared the Latin we spoke was a mutilation of the language, that this "savage" had mastered the Latin of perfection. And the "savage" proceeded to teach us this perfect language and made rapid strides into the difficulties of our mutilation. He traveled with us nearly three weeks and was good company, hilarious, but thoroughly vicious and unprincipled. He sang ribald songs that I wonder at my daring in mentioning them, and his sentiments towards the fair sex betrayed the savage. I flushed at the way he alluded to the ladies; he considered them without soul or value, and frankly told us when he and his people renounced all that was delightful then civilization would welcome them. "To efface the savage condition," the gentleman informed us, "will take centuries; till then—bah!"

Evidently the Potolilis did not desire civilization.

Potolili had an extremely cultivated palate and delighted in preparing and introducing many peculiar dishes at our meals. An epicure he may have been, but we certainly were far his superiors when it came to cooking and politely refused to partake of any of his messes.

In return he rated our food as abominable, but Sheldon's coffee made him blink. In compliment we made strenuous overtures to his wine, which had the appearance of water and a bouquet divine. It put fire in our veins, courage in our hearts, and we existed in the confidence that only the mighty

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enjoy. We were soon familiar enough with Potolili's language to question him regarding the new land we were entering. We learned scientists were exploring the northern heavens when startled by thousands of vari-colored sparks belching from the earth.

They hastened back to headquarters and informed their colleagues, who flashed the news to various observatories and triumphantly published the report throughout Centauri. This aroused controversy and much speculation concerning the brilliant signals, and the following evening four different scientific societies sailed to the north in hopes of viewing the remarkable streams of light.

"Atmospheric experimenters and learned astronomers are continually invading the northern regions. Their aim is to circle the moon," Potolili informed us. "Ten years ago the inhabitants of the moon signaled to us. When the moon was at the full, a broad stream of vivid light issued from her heart, illuminating the heavens. The phenomenon aroused widespread discussion among the scientific societies throughout the country, the chief excitement being not one knew more than the other. Peace came only with the waning of the moon, which absorbed the brilliant stream, and the signal never flashed again. Since that time plans have been formed, experiments made, volumes written, all with a view to circling the moon."

"In what?" I gasped.

"Balloons!" muttered Saxe. "I told you they were balloons, and that ninny over there (indicating

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Saunders) declared they were planets; bless my soul!"

Potolili shrugged his shoulders. He had become accustomed to our interruptions and patiently waited till we ended our side talk, then continued without answering my question.

"The four societies wonderingly witnessed the northern phenomenon. As the narrow ribbons of fire shot upward, bursting into thousands of bright-hued sparks, these wise men concluded it was a signal of some sort and claim they responded; then hurriedly returned and reported to the Centaurians, who communicated with and solicited aid of the Potolilis, the most northern tribe in the universe. We are thoroughly familiar with these regions up to a certain degree, beyond that we dare not venture, though we have a legend that centuries ago a sturdy Potolili dared into the Unknown and safely reached the other side. He encountered a strange, wild race, became their chief and founder of the Potolili tribe over there. It is doubtful, as are all legends, but it adds distinction to the Potolilis, and enrages the Octrogonas, with whom we are at war—they are legendless.

"Our instructions were, if we discovered anything to return with it, or with news without delay. Our reward will be a piece of land we have coveted for over half a century. The scientific societies are regarded with respect, awe, and have a wide and popular hearing; but little reliance is placed upon their reports. They are continually discovering something that, upon investigation, refuses to be

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discovered ; and in this instance I believe the learned ones themselves are doubtful whether they saw all they claim they did ; otherwise all Centauri would have accompanied us north. The scientists described the phenomenon, stated the degree they sailed in, and hazarded a guess as to the latitude the lights blazed in. Navigators of the clouds are always hazy on distance. With this meagre information we started out upon the search, constantly fearing the signal lights would flash beyond our sphere and force us to abandon them. The vapors of the ice world congeals in our lungs and—the end. We had been out scarcely a week when very abruptly we came across an odd-looking car with four men inside very sound asleep. We were astonished to so soon discover the phenomenon, while the little battered car increased our wonder. It is a fair imitation of the one in Centur, said to have been in use six hundred years ago. Centur is the city of Centauri.

“You people are the same complexion as the Centaurians. We knew of the continent on the other side of the globe, its wide civilization and perpetual progression. Science revealed all this to us, but it was reserved for the Potolilis to discover that Centauri is six centuries in advance of the other side. This car and contents are rare antiquities and of fabulous value. Have you any savages on your side such as Potolili and his tribe?”

We considered Potolili about as clever a rascal as ever existed. “Savages” of his calibre were not a rarity on our side ; but what a sensation he would

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create in our land with his herculean physique, flashing eyes, glib tongue and cruel, brilliant intellect. His reason was tumultuous, ruling for strife, war.

It riled Saxe, that his invention had been produced six centuries ago, and proudly, with long explanations, he displayed the handsomely engraved plan of the lost *Propellier*. Potolili turned aside to hide his mirth, we were a continual source of amusement to him. But he became deeply interested in Sheldon's map of the world and marveled much at the injured, disjointed instruments belonging to Saunders's impaired collection. He examined the remaining telescope with great curiosity, informing us it was patterned after antiquated astronomical curios in the museum. Saunders reared, and came back with: That it was a moderately good telescope; could not compare with those blown up in the explosion, but it had been of invaluable service to him in his labors. Then he swerved upon his favorite topic and began to bleat of the great planet Virgilius. Potolili roared and begged us to wait till we reached the Centaurians. "But, remember," he cried, gazing at us with sudden respect, "though we have six hundred years the advantage, you have accomplished what is beyond us. The Centaurians will go mad and receive you as gods."

We gazed at this man who called himself a savage, and apprehensively wondered what the Centaurians were like.

Gradually, thankfully, we emerged from the ice wilderness where for months we had miserably wandered, and under Potolili's guidance made a

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wide detour to avoid a chain of lakes which seemingly divided the Pole regions from the living world. We crossed a low range of hills blocking the way to a sloping valley, thinly mantled with snow, which melted to slush beneath a burning sun. The temperature changed completely, this wide marsh freed us entirely from the ice, snow and deadly northern vapors, leading us to a rich, verdant, luxuriant country, a wonderful country whose lofty, snow-capped mountains, velvet mantled in soft green, reared sharply in the clear atmosphere of deep azure, and Potolili impulsively threw out his arms, murmuring: "The potency of God is sublime; He is the universe."

Yet, with all this loveliness before us, half regretfully we glanced back at the mist enveloped, frozen world, gleaming white, shadowy, mystic, beautiful, so beautiful—at a distance.

We traveled over vast prairies, wide, trackless, where herds of wild horses galloped; over rich meadow-land, where sheep and cattle grazed in countless numbers; we rested in fertile valleys ripe with fields of promise, swaying yellow seas of grain, and finally entered a deep, odorous, wooded country, abundant with wild fruit and vegetation. The refreshing splash of rushing waters guided us to the bank of a clear sparkling stream, and heedless of Potolili's warning concerning chills, we plunged in for a long-needed swim. We sported like schoolboys, our spirits rose, we grew boisterous, the swim revived and freed our bodies from all tired aches. Saunders declared we had at last discovered the

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River of Life. "Whose source springs from the inexhaustible wells of my great body of fresh water," Sheldon added.

We guyed him unmercifully, but he answered good-naturedly and the cool, green-shaded wood rang with our shouts. Saxe. felt so frisky he started a song in a terrible bass; we joined in the chorus and traveled some distance before it dawned upon us Potolili did not approve of our noise, though occasionally he smiled sympathetically. He looked worried, was unusually silent, and his manner, also that of his men, appeared very uneasy. He had sent little bands ahead to reconnoitre, and all sharply watched hedges and thicket, and jumped at every sound. Finally Potolili told us we would very soon have to part company. "We are nearing the Octrogonas reservation," he explained. "Possibly you may have to travel a few miles alone. Follow the river bank, it leads direct to Latonia. But you'll reach the Octrogonas first; they're on the lookout for you and will present you to the Centaurians, and attempt to claim the discovery. I have sent a messenger ahead over the mountains, and before you fall in with this savage tribe the Centaurians will know the northern streams of light heralded the arrival of four wise men from the other side."

From the disdainful way Potolili mentioned the Octrogonas we concluded they ranked rather low in the advanced civilization of this side and believed we were about to encounter the genuine, every-day savage of our world (Saxe. got his box

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of beads handy), consequently we suggested to Potolili to remain with us and personally hand over his "discovery" to the Centaurians. Potolili coughed slightly and declined our suggestion, informing us his escort ended at the frontier of the Octrogonas reservation; a formidable, but cowardly tribe, with whom at present he was at war. Bands of both tribes were continually meeting in conflict and he considered us safer without him.

"These wretched savages would have seized you long ago," he added; "but fear us and dare not venture beyond the limit of their own land. The cause of the present war? Women! Old Octrogonas very conveniently died recently and the young devil was proclaimed chief. His first act was for war; he seized my daughter, who is the most beautiful thing ever created. He imprisoned her and forced her to become his bride. Women willingly mated to the Octrogonas are outcasts; those forced into union are martyrs. My daughter is a martyr—what a fate! I will kill Octrogonas on sight!"

We murmured sympathy. Potolili suddenly seemed greatly cast down, though his gayety while traveling with us would never lead one to believe he had just lost a beautiful daughter.

"Yes," he continued, "they have gone too far; they are progressing, becoming bolder; but I will exterminate them—that is their fate. For two centuries we have been warring with these people for this same offence—they will pilfer us of our women. The Octrogonas are doomed; we shall overcome and command them. It cannot be otherwise, we

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are more advanced, more civilized, more numerous. War must cease, but existence can revel in superb tranquillity only when humanity has mastered the divine wisdom to thoroughly control all emotions, then is perfect civilization attained; but passion damns the universe to everlasting savagery. The Centaurians," he informed us, "were at one time divided into many tribes, speaking different languages, and being unable to understand each other would go to war on that account. They declared war at the least provocation, then prolonged it because pride, honor or fear of losing prestige with other nations was at stake. They would dispute about the depth of the ocean, then go to war over it; whether the other side of the earth was inhabited was always a good incentive; then some powerful tribe would discover a weaker one had in their possession vast fields of production, or perhaps a neck of land, skirting their own, rich in metal, gems, and war is declared with the avowed intention of exterminating the weaker foe simply to enrich themselves. Sometimes these plans miscarried and the weaker foe became enriched—this was savagery beyond our conception. These wars of avarice brought the downfall of the nations. To-day they number but one—the Centaurians, a rich and powerful tribe. The Centauri Reservation extends over the whole of this portion of the globe, they speak one language, and have named the universe after themselves. Their chief is revered as sublime, and is a descendant of the founder of the Centauris, who, it is claimed, fell from the star bearing that name.

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They are a grand, god-like race, having reached the zenith of perfect civilization, yet still possess one uncontrollable passion—an irreverent desire for knowledge. They would ride the heavens, visit the moon and stars, yet dare not explore the other side of their own little planet.

“Oh, Centauri! Centauri!” roared Potolili derisively; “four men, their own color, yet still in the savage state” (he laughed), “have accomplished what Centauri is still dreaming of. But the superiority of a superb people will acknowledge and praise your daring. A true savage, jealous, doubts and jeers. I worship the Centaurians; the men are gods, the women—ah!” he clasped his hands, sighing voluptuously, “the women are divine!”

Fourteen hours later we parted from Potolili.

“You are entering the Octrogonia domain,” he told us. “I am sad at parting, but we shall meet again. Good luck.”

We could not let him or his men depart without some little token of our esteem; this regard deeply affected them.

Saxe. presented a canoe to Potolili. He was delighted with the gift. The canoes had attracted his attention above everything else in the car, he had never seen one before. I created a sensation by distributing money. Potolili informed me the museum contained many of these rare, valuable coins. Saxe. cautioned me to preserve my gold, and he became very stingy with his beads. Potolili had curiously examined Saxe.’s collection of beads, but preferred the canoe because it could not be

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found in the museum. The beads, however, were there in every variety, and were priceless; they were relics of an extinct age.

Potolili embraced us and bestowed upon Saxe. a most peculiar ring of dull, coral-red metal. The width of the ring reached the first joint of the finger, and was ornamented with a diamond whose least value in our country would have reached four figures. It flashed a steel-blue glint. We learned later this magnificent gem was a production of man. The Centaurians had discovered the secret of the diamond.

### CHAPTER X.

We entered the Octroogona domain, a dank, tropical forest, whose gigantic trees towered hundreds of feet. Giant palms shaded glassy pools, dark green, where huge, pale lilies floated, poisoning the air with their strong, sweet, sickening odor. In this moist, slumberous richness, heavy with unhealthy vapors, flowers of marvelous beauty and strange, unknown fruits, berries grew in abundance. Sheldon, who was fond of strawberries, gathered a quantity of deep-red, luscious-appearing fruit; but Saxe. warned him against eating them, declaring the berries too large, that strawberries of great size always tasted like turnips. These berries were stringy and juiceless, with a peculiar, sharp flavor, that blistered the palate. Fortunately we refused the first mouthful, the fruit was poisonous; but we indulged freely in rich, purple clusters of wild

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grapes, with a deep wine flavor, and thoroughly satisfied our curiosity regarding all fruit discovered in our wanderings. For nearly a week we roamed in the enchanting Octrogonia forest, but saw nary an Octrogonia. We strayed far from the river bank, lost our way, and in the confusion trying to find it plunged deeper into the wondrous, tropical maze. The forest was alive with animal and bird mysteries. For hours we followed strange, uncouth tracks, made by some monster. Occasionally the wood rang with shrill, bell-like notes, followed by groaning, moaning sounds that chilled us. The roaring of distant lions was cheerful in comparison, but forced us to realize our peril. Monstrous birds of gay plumage chirped to us, but flew higher in the trees as we approached. Great red and gold serpents coiled and twisted, but glided to higher branches as we stopped to watch them, where they regarded us curiously from their brilliant, unblinking eyes. Once we came near being trampled under by a strange, wild herd of ponies. They clattered past, snorting and neighing, and glared viciously at us. They were queer, shaggy, little ponies, with monstrous heads. Frequently as dusk approached we were startled by wild, uncanny hoots, and saw huge, elongated bodies whirr from tree to tree. We came across one of these creatures lying prone upon the ground, its immense, gauze wings spread wide in the sun. Believing it dead we poked and prodded the body, which was covered with a pale brown down. Saxe., very curious, attempted to turn the thing on its back; suddenly the wings flut-

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tered, the mouth opened wide and out forked pointed red fangs. With a loud, sibilant sound it flew up in the tree. We watched it as it gently settled among the branches.

"Queer thing, neither animal nor fowl," mused Sheldon.

"It's animal," Saxe. informed us in authoritative, yet argumentative tones. "It's the winged lizard, which has become extinct on our side."

Sheldon coughed doubtfully. "Flying lizard—ahem!"

We encountered a colony of gigantic apes dwelling in little huts made of foliage and tree branches. The tiny village rested in a wide inclosure. Our approach created great excitement, the apes trooped from their huts and clustered around us. They seemed friendly, but one huge fellow familiarly grasped Saxe.'s shoulder, the next instant he sprawled upon the ground. Then they showed fight, but we routed them. They rushed up the trees, shrieking and chattering, and began pelting us with leaden fruit. We stampeded. Sheldon and Saunders speeded and left us to haul the car. When we caught up with them they were learnedly wrangling over Darwin.

"Wrong, boys; altogether wrong," Saxe. solemnly informed them. "We've committed a grave blunder. Those were the Octrogonas, and we've insulted them."

Saxe. joined the Darwin debate.

The clear, sparkling stream which Saunders vowed was the River of Life proved as illusive,

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but we did not despair, the luxurious forest was way ahead of the ice blockade, and feeling confident that ultimately we would be discovered by either the Octrogonas or Centaurians we leisurely and cheerfully penetrated deeper into the dense, mystic wood, under the impression we could discover a new route and unexpectedly stumbled across, not the long-searched-for river, but the Octrogonas, who seemed astounded at seeing us. They closed around us at once. Warriors, magnificent men, clad for war in steel-like armor light as wool. They were a detachment of the Octrogonas army guarding the frontier. We told them where we came from, had been discovered by the Potolilis, and had strayed from the river bank. Judging by their astonishment it was the first they'd heard of us, but they treated us with the greatest courtesy, the Captain explaining that his regiment had been camped in the woods for weeks. They received little news, but were aware the warring tribes had met in several engagements, and with a whoop informed us the Octrogonas had been victorious in all. What the war was over they neglected to state. They questioned us closely concerning the Potolilis, and seemed disappointed because we could give no information. They finally escorted us to the edge of the woods, pointed out the route, and there, far in the distance, sparkling, dancing in its serpentine course, was the river whose bank we were still to follow. The directions were clearly given, but at the last the Captain thought it advisable to send a couple of guards with us. We

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thanked him and departed jubilant, glad to be rid of the strange, dense forest, which to us seemed to extend over the whole of this half of the world.

We traveled in an open, rugged country, meeting numerous detachments, small armies bound for some place where the enemy had been located and hoping for battle. The troops halted at sight of us. We were detained and gaped at while the guards explained who we were and where we came from. Toward evening we reached the main camp of the Octrogonia army, a soft, green plain, dotted with a formidable array of tents pitched closely together, row upon row. The Octrogonia army numbered thousands. Evidently we were expected, pickets lowered arms as we passed, and the news flew of our arrival. Warriors trooped from their quarters to gaze wonderingly at us and our strange little car, and reverently helmets were raised in salute. Then suddenly the air rang with cheers.

We uncovered, shouting response. The soldiers crowded about us in welcome. We were detained a few minutes, then hustled into the car and dozens of willing hands pulled us along at a lively speed. Accompanied by cheering hundreds, we halted before a wide, square tent, staked in the center of the camp and were escorted to a cool, fragrant room fitted up with barbaric splendor. A hanging of skin was flung aside, and a man advanced to meet us. We knew at once this was Octrogonia.

He was darkly handsome; magnificent physique, his magnetism invincible. He was born to rule. With piercing glance he scanned our faces, then

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like a mask the sternness vanished. His smile was as sweetly alluring as a woman's.

"Greetings! greetings!" he cried, clasping Saxe's hand.

We clustered about him and each in turn received the embrace of welcome. He motioned us to seats, then explained he had been commissioned by the Centaurians to discover the cause of the phenomenal northern lights, but Potolili, with whom he was at war (his face darkened ominously), had spies, vermin, crawling throughout the Octrogona forces, who conveyed to their chief the news of the northern commission, etc.

Potolili at once organized and headed an expedition and was well on his way north before the Octrogonas had commenced preparations.

"To the Potolilis," he continued, "is the credit, reward, of discovery; but it is an honor stolen, and for the theft they shall pay. I have vowed this war shall end only with the extermination of the Potolilis. The black tribes must dissolve in one; the enemy does not progress; they are now as centuries ago—savages. They are guilty of innumerable outrages against us; from our stock they pick the best, and for years have appropriated our women and boasted of their gallantry because the women failed to return—they dared not. They have in every way sought to injure our good repute with the Centaurians, and Potolili's latest offence is the seizure of my sister. He forcibly removed her and her women from the retreat I had placed her in. She was the most beautiful woman of the

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Octrogonal tribe, but the moment she became Potolili's possession she became an outcast—she hastens his downfall."

I didn't dare look at Sheldon.

"I say, boys," he muttered, "what a jolly opinion they have of each other, and what holy liars! Five to one on crafty Potolili, against this fiery young scamp!"

We didn't take his bet, but it went hard to keep from grinning. His language was so droll beside Octrogonal's lofty tirade, whose eyes now snapped as he realized, for some reason, we were laughing at him.

Saxe hastened to express sympathy, and declared we all hoped the Octrogonal forces would be victorious. Octrogonal saluted deeply, at the same time keeping a suspicious eye on Sheldon, which caused Saunders to irritably remark: That Sheldon was an ass whose noisy braying would eventually get us all into trouble.

Potolili's agility in discovering us evidently greatly exasperated Octrogonal.

"He will be rewarded with a piece of land we've both coveted for over fifty years," he hissed. "But I'll wrest it from him! Do you know the moment he sighted you a messenger was sent over the mountains to report to the Centaurians, who will arrive shortly to escort you to their territory. If we were at peace Potolili would have forced you people over the mountains to prevent our meeting, but the journey is dangerous during war time. He suffered heavy losses during his northern trip, my

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troops slaughtered the Potolilis in every engagement. I had troops stationed in ambush to capture Potolili when he neared the reservation, never believing he would abandon his 'discovery' three miles from the boundary line. He is a coward, sneak, and up to his old deviltry! He will not fight openly like a soldier! But it is destiny, the Octrogonas will be victorious. And, gentlemen (he bowed deeply), my abode is at your disposal."

We thanked him, mentioning the car, preferring not to intrude upon him.

Impatiently he threw up his hand, commanding silence, then conducted us to an adjoining tent and advised us to "cleanse," while attendants hauled in several huge jars containing ice water.

"I suppose he thinks we bathed every day in an ice lake while fooling around the Pole," grumbled Sheldon, dousing himself in the chilling water.

"He certainly had some good reason for forcing us to clean up in water at freezing point," Saxe admitted. "Let's ask him for it."

"Ask him for what?" sputtered Saunders.

"Something to eat," murmured Saxe sweetly.

And Saunders glared because we all snickered.

Octrogonas' quarters consisted of a number of tents pitched closely together in a circle, and when we ventured forth we promptly became entangled in the tent maze, butting into places where we had no business to and startling a number of dusky individuals who rushed upon us chattering wildly, but promptly salaamed as though we were gods. And they were black! Whew!

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Octrogonia suddenly appeared, laughing loudly at our discomfiture. We murmured apologies, which he politely waived aside and escorted us to the front tent.

Refreshments were served. The table was loaded with strange delicacies. Roasted fish stuffed with berries swimming in the fresh juice of grapes; wild game sliced with crushed nuts, and meat spiced with rich, tropical fruit, tempted the appetite, yet everything was cold—and Saxe. longed for soup. The wine was the same brand Potolili had been so lavish with, and though of a clear, sparkling crystal, was searching. Octrogonia, in his dining, was civilized, a *bon vivant*. The service was excellent, putting us on our mettle and rousing to action our rusty table etiquette.

After dining Octrogonia expressed a wish to examine the car. We placed it at his disposal. He examined everything with much curiosity, and for an old string of wax pearls, presented Saxe. with an armlet carved from quartz ornamented with five flashing emeralds.

“You’re trading at a bargain, old boy,” Sheldon told him, but he was frowned to silence and found solace brewing his coffee, which he wanted Octrogonia to taste. Octrogonia seemed doubtful of the cup handed to him, but inhaling the aroma, drank with relish. The flavor tickled his palate, and he begged for some of the beans. We decided the cultivation of coffee had become a lost industry. It seemed impossible these enlightened people had never discovered it.

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We returned to the tent and were served with syrupy liqueur in large silver thimbles, and some queer little cakes that tasted like sweetened mud. We avoided the cakes, but the liqueur! what a bouquet! and how it flushed us! Even Octrogonal, who no doubt was seasoned, seemed affected. His eyes flashed, his lips thickened voluptuously, and his tongue loosened confidentially. With a sigh he told us of Potolili's daughter, which originally was not his intention.

"The most beautiful woman in the world!" he exclaimed with amorous enthusiasm. "The women of Centauri are divine, but Potolili's daughter is —heaven!"

"She is your prisoner," I blurted out before Saxe could prevent.

Octrogonal eyed me keenly for a second, then replied: "No, I am her prisoner—her slave!"

"Hum! got it bad!" murmured Sheldon, ever alert to mix things.

"As you know of Potolili's daughter," Octrogonal continued, eying me severely, "and undoubtedly believe she is my prisoner, which is false, perhaps you can give me some information concerning my sister Gona."

"I cannot," I replied. "Potolili did not mention your sister, though he told of the abduction of his daughter."

"That man is a traitor, liar!" Octrogonal yelled fiercely. "He abducted Gona, then learning we were preparing for war he sends his daughter, whose beauty is renowned, sends this lovely girl

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among my men to lead their thoughts from war to love. She obtained sympathy for her father and his people, she lowered my sister in the esteem of my soldiers, declaring Gona went voluntarily, having long been enamoured with Potolili. (This we did not doubt.) By the merest chance I heard of the matter and ordered the lovely devil brought before me. And she came like the Queen, enchantress, that she is, reclining amid silken cushions and flowers and borne aloft by worshippers.

"I was dazzled, and—er—," Octrogonal paused, his glance shifted, "she is still here." Then realizing the comical side of the situation, he burst out laughing.

"She and her father are schemers, and have no equal for craftiness," he continued. "Her mission is to influence all in favor of her people, to arouse so-called brotherly love, and effect the unification of tribes, with—er—Potolili as supreme chief. Until her mission is accomplished she will not permit me to possess her, yet swears to her love for me. She is not a prisoner, but I have placed her where she can work no further mischief except upon me; and I love her! I love her! She has full freedom, but at the least sign or inclination to return to her people she becomes a prisoner and a slave to my fancy."

"Octrogonal! Octrogonal!" we heard a voice wail in protest, sweet as a bell. With a stride Octrogonal reached the end of the tent, flung aside the hanging and drew forth the shrinking woman.

We knew she was Potolili's daughter. No one

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in the world could resemble him so completely. She was beautiful, wondrously beautiful, in a sensuous, barbaric fashion. Her luxurious tresses, glossily rippled unconfined; her dusky neck, shoulders, arms were devoid of covering except for the flashing gems that hid most of her charms. Soft, white, shimmering stuff wound around her form. This woman, with her great animal magnetism, could sway and rule as she pleased. The conquest of Octrogonal was diversion to her. She hung upon his shoulder with her full weight. He flung his arm around her, both were oblivious of our presence. In silence he gazed into her deep eyes with intense love, and she cooed to him while one pretty hand caressed his cheek.

"Octrogonal, I am your prisoner," we heard her tell him. "Your eyes thrill, hold me, your glance is stronger than prison bars."

"I should say so!" muttered Sheldon, who had become very restless.

"I love you! I love you!" the siren went on. "Octrogonal, your pleasure is mine."

Swiftly he bent his head and pressed his lips to hers.

"No," said Sheldon, turning his back upon them, "they're not married yet. Matrimony is death to that sort of thing. And I say, boys, she's playing the same old game on him, and they claim to be six hundred years ahead of us. That fiery boy is as blind as a bat. Twenty to one foxy Potolili rules the two tribes in less than a month, and I don't

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blame Octrogon. She's a glorious woman! Jove, a glorious woman!"

Before we could put a quietus on Sheldon, several men rushed excitedly into the tent.

"The Centaurians!" they cried. "The Centaurians are coming!"

Octrogon awoke as from a dream, becoming at once cold, alert, diplomatic. He gently put the girl from him, and with a deep bow urged her to retire. With a lingering glance she stepped from view. He turned quickly to us, murmuring: "The Centaurians!" and we hurried outside. The camp twinkled brightly with lights. We could see the soldiers crowding from their quarters to gaze up at a dozen or more great balls of fire, which were circling and lowering like buzzards.

A chariot drawn by three magnificent horses dashed up to where we stood. Octrogon explained the Centaurians would meet us in the plains a half mile distant, and invited us to enter the chariot. We declined, expressing the wish to travel in our car; it had brought us so far it could convey us to the Centaurians. Octrogon displayed wisdom; he avoided argument, and hurriedly entered the car with us, ordering it to be attached to the chariot, and away we started amid wild cheers from the soldiers. Many followed some distance, shouting lustily, and in the enthusiasm we whooped and jumped like a brace of Indians.

Octrogon laughed till his sides ached.

But at last we were to meet the Centaurians and witness civilization six hundred years in advance of

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our own. We wondered what these new people were like, and gravely pondered between conflicting thoughts of hope and fear.

Sheldon believed his great body of fresh water a discovered fact. The Centaurians would escort him to view these marvelous waters.

Saunders, jubilant, chuckled with enthusiasm as he speculated upon the vast improvements accomplished in six hundred years upon astronomical instruments, which he expected placed at his disposal for a thorough analytic inspection of the planet Virgilius, and he confidentially informed me it was his intention to join the next expedition to the moon. Saxe thought of the lost *Propellier*, and figured on the powerful proportions it must have attained in so many centuries of improvement. As for myself, I grew wild, restless with expectation. I thought of the wraith, devil, woman, what you will, that had decoyed me to this world. The luring, smiling beauty frenzied me. Centauri, Centauri, was the name my heart gave her.

Swiftly we reached the plains, plunging into brilliant illumination cast by great search-lights in the towers of a number of—ships!

We pressed forward in amazement.

“Powers above, they’re ships!” Sheldon cried.

“Ferry-boats!” I gasped.

And the decks were crowded. The boats presented a gala appearance, streamers and banners flying, the upper decks shaded with gay-colored awnings. We could easily see into the brilliantly-lighted salons, and wondered at the sparkling in-

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terior, and down the sides of all these vessels people jostled and hurried.

A number of men hastened to meet us. Stalwart, massive fellows, white, but a dark tinge, and every blessed mother's son of them as handsome as Apollo. Potolili spoke the truth, the Centaurians were gods.

"Good heavens, what magnificent people!" I cried out in admiration.

"Aye," answered Sheldon, "to see something like this is worth crossing the Pole. For the first time in my life I see a *man*!"

His remark irritated Saxe. "Curtail your tongues!" he snapped. "The more perfect the body the less soul it contains. Sheldon, you've lost your senses. Undoubtedly those splendid creatures are men; so are we. Perfection we cannot boast, but we possess souls."

"Do we, now?" squeaked Saunders, who never permitted any one to worry Sheldon except himself. But Saxe only scowled, and with Octroogona, stepped from the car.

"Wonder if the climate is affecting old Saxe?" Saunders inquired.

"You started it!" Sheldon growled.

"And you got the blame for it!" I retorted.

"Hist! don't quarrel; come along," Saunders urged hurriedly. "Suppose they expect to rope us on to those boats."

We hurried after Saxe., who spruced up lively as a Centaurian advanced to greet us. A handsome, broad-shouldered gentleman, who spoke words of

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welcome in Latin, pure and simple, much to the astonishment of Saxe., who expected a mutilation of every language under the sun thrown into one. Many crowded around us, eager to shake hands, and we were extravagantly complimented upon accomplishing the "remarkably daring exploit of crossing the Polar regions." Of course Saxe. received most of the honors and bowed continually, while we stood in the rear a sort of reflection, though I noticed many eying me curiously and suddenly a group of gay, young men, who had held aloof, laughing and joking among themselves, no doubt at me, rushed forward and closed around me, and to my chagrin, boldly criticised my face and form, muttering: "A Centauri, a Centauri!"

"Now don't get conceited, Sally," Sheldon admonished. "These fellows think you as pretty as you think them."

And sizing up the fresh boys, I realized I was as broad, massive, if not quite as tall as they. Sheldon's remark made me blush like a girl, the color flamed my face, and perceiving it the Centaurians shouted with glee. One slapped me on the back, another patted my cheek, a third pulled me one way, while a fourth drew me in the opposite direction. I caught the nearest man, raised him above my head, swung him around several times, then flung him from me. Another rushed upon me and, to show my strength, I caught him with one arm, tossed him high as though he were a ball, dizzied him with a rapid swing, then laid him gently on his back. It was enough.

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"A Centauri! A Centauri!" they shouted, crowding closer. Then amid laughter and cheers I was hoisted and carried in triumph aboard one of the ships. What a predicament had I been less strong! Such a glory this muscular popularity (?).

Saxe., Sheldon and Saunders laughingly followed and cheered with the crowd. They were proud of their Sally? Well!

Our staunch little car created considerable anxiety, but finally, with the utmost care and reverence, was hoisted aboard.

Octroguna accompanied us to the ship simply to go through the formality of explaining that we would meet again. He gave a long hand-clasp to Saxe., to whom apparently he'd taken a great fancy, while that gentleman advised him that "Peace is the Spirit of civilization," and begged him cease the continual warfare with Potolili.

"Become friends, comrades," continued Saxe., warming up. "Yield to the pleading of the girl you love, or you may lose her. She will return to her people."

"Oh, no!" Octroguna answered quickly. "I love her youth, beauty; but passion does not control me; I delight in anticipation. The girl is mine, and she will never return to her people."

"This savage delights in anticipation," murmured Sheldon, "and those on our side delight in precipitation. Wow!"

"Have you ever met Potolili?" Saxe. asked.

"No!" cried Octroguna, aghast. "Meet Potolili! Oh, no!"

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"You should," Saxe. urged, undaunted. "You love the daughter, you will be charmed with the father. Just give the word, he will meet you more than half."

"Ah, no doubt, no doubt," said Octrogonal drily; "but (politely wishing to make Saxe. happy), I shall consider your advice. It never occurred to me to meet Potolili, but it could be arranged, and to please the girl I am willing to make some concessions; then—ahem! my sister Gona, is still his captive."

Saxe. was pleased and satisfied his words would go a long way toward ending the war. He patted Octrogonal on the back, who seemed immensely tickled about something. Saxe. smiled indulgently. He considered this great chief merely a hot-headed boy, and renewed the risky topic, endeavoring to impress Octrogonal with the wisdom of meeting his enemy. But Octrogonal was too politic to continue the subject and seemed suddenly very anxious to depart. He astonished Saxe. by tenderly embracing him, then bowing deeply to us, hurriedly left the ship. We saw him enter the chariot, he waved his hand as the horses plunged into gallop. Saxe. twirled his cap, but our attention was attracted to the strange vibration of the ship, accompanied by an odd whirring sound, and two huge black objects at the sides slowly unfurled and gently fluttered in the breeze. They looked like the wings of a monster bat, and the boat began moving—moving upwards. Heavens knows what we thought when boarding

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the vessel, but it never occurred to us we would sail the air.

"It's a flying machine!" gasped Saxe.

"An air ship!" echoed Sheldon.

And we continued to float upward, the vessel rolling and rocking as in a rough sea, causing Sheldon to exclaim: "The damned thing'll roll clean over and dump us all out!" And then to impress the gentlemen surrounding us that his remark had been one of learning he began conversing earnestly in his most polished, class-room manner with a tall gentleman beside him. A fine old individual, with a long grey beard, towed Saunders off, and Saxe became the center of a group of men, who plied him with questions and were eagerly questioned in turn.

A handsome young man took possession of me—he was the Governor's son, and introduced himself as Tolna; and I learned we were the guests of the Governor, and were being conveyed to Latonia in his private yacht. I questioned Tolna as to the safety of traveling by the zephyr route, and was keen concerning the rolling of the ship, explaining it was my first experience of air navigation. He looked incredulous, and I reminded him his people were six centuries in advance of those of my country.

"But we are considering the air ship," I continued. "We are just realizing the air is navigable, and several bright men have invented machines that were received fairly well by the press, but the atmosphere did not take kindly to them. The fatalities incurred ruinous skepticism."

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"Fatality, Skepticism, are the parents of Progression," Tolna informed me. "Without either the universe would be vacuum. Skepticism is the spur; Fatality, realization. Vessels sailing the clouds have been our mode of traveling for centuries, continual improvement have made the ships absolutely safe. I do not think the air ship can be perfected further unless something altogether new is invented. For speed, comfort, elegance, the air ship has no parallel. This rolling and slanting is simply the upward motion, like birds whose wings flutter spasmodically to a certain height then straight they speed almost without motion. Our ship will soon reach the altitude, the rolling, flapping of sails will cease, and the smoothness, evenness of travel will enrapture you. A feathered pet served as the model for the first invention, which can be seen in the museum at Centur. It is a remarkably cunning, useless contrivance, but is the foundation of this superb floating machine. Do not fail to visit the museum when you reach Centur."

Tolna's explanation undoubtedly was very elevating, but there was considerably more to learn about the air ship; and apparently we had reached the desired altitude, for the pitching and rolling ceased, and we flew straight ahead upon an infinite avenue of ether, so swiftly as to seem motionless. I was conducted to view the engine which was inclosed in a crystal cage stretching the length down the center of the ship. The machinery was a complicated mass of golden wires, crossed and recrossed with an astonishing assortment of tiny wheels, all

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revolving around a powerful arm that hammered swiftly up and down, and received force from a treacherous looking cylinder dashing back and forth. I became absorbed in the confusion of wires drawn swiftly over their golden pulleys, the sheen of yellow metal was dazzling.

Tolna turned me over to the engineer, who invited me to enter the glass cage with him. The kindly fellow patiently answered all my questions (know the senseless questions of greenhorns?) and explained the whole intricate mass of machinery which comprised five distinct separate engines, with only one in action; and fascinated, I watched the one working engine that compelled this huge structure to float upon the air. Then I made thorough examinations, vividly impressing the whole superb complication upon my memory. I was determined to master the mystery of the air ship before returning to my own country. Finally Tolna returned, some sign passed between him and the engineer, which I caught for all my absorbed contemplation. Evidently the engineer wished me out of the way, and hurriedly I departed with Tolna, who informed me my friends had made inquiries for me.

My three friends were hugely enjoying themselves. Each in their element, the center of a crowd, were lecturing with gusto upon the merits of their respective hobbies. Saxe. was exhibiting the interior of his car, and his face glowed with pride at the extraordinary interest the Centaurians took in the engraving of the lost *Propellier*.

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Saunders was displaying the mutilated portions of his various astronomical instruments; his one uninjured instrument created a sensation. The Centaurians had never seen anything like it. Nothing in that line could compete with it in the museum at Centur, and they warned Saunders his little, old telescope would be seized by the government to be exhibited as a rare curio. He would be compensated, of course, of course—any one could see Saunders grow.

Sheldon was very important—irritatingly so—and had assumed an attitude of condescension little short of cuss words. He had quite the largest group of listeners, and was explaining with authoritative distinctness the many points of interest upon his map of the world.

But I culled the attention of all by distributing a few gold and silver coins, and this little generosity begot a tremendously new sensation. For the first time in my life I was the recipient of *thanks*, the value exceeding by far the gift; and under the unusual experience I became awkward, blushed and stammered.

What a startling, barbaric custom! Thanks! thanks! thanks! Prevailing etiquette of our world voted acceptance in any form, but a blasé, indifferent manner, the acme of vulgarity. Favor conferred in acceptance—the recipient's due, etc. Scientists delved into chaos, feverishly pursuing a wraith-like, fascinating substance, they labeled Gratitude, but the experts failed to discover the

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slightest streak of this rare ore of their brains. Universal is the belief in Gratitude, but no one—no one—has ever witnessed it.

Tolna escorted us to the cabin, which was richly furnished. Pale, cloudy material draped the walls; soft damask skins carpeted the floors; there were many couches and roomy seats in odd, fantastic forms, marvelous with intricate carving, massive, weighty, as though hewed from stone, yet lighter than wood.

The Centaurians had mastered the rare art of combining beauty with comfort. I sank into a thickly cushioned seat and sipped the strange poignant liqueur Tolna served in tiny glasses. The poignant bouquet swept the cobwebs of fatigue from my system, and boldly I complimented the handsome youth, who looked as though he had just stepped from some mediæval painting. The Centaurians were a marvelously enlightened people, but in mode of dress had apparently remained stationary. They adhered, probably from time immemorial, to the pictureque, easy costume of the ancient Romans, but the gorgeous, pagan splendor of Rome paled before the barbaric magnificence of Centauri, scintillating in gem-studded fabrics. Sheldon, who was near, whispered excitedly: "The wealth of the world must be on this side. These fellows are stiff with richness—six centuries ahead—barbarians!"

"Orientals," I suggested.

"Nonsense!" he retorted. "But they do remind me a little of the Chinese—same costume since the

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year one. You've tipped Saunders one better, he declares these people are descendants of a lost tribe of Romans or Jews, explaining the wandering Jews discovered themselves again in the Romans, while the meandering Romans were lassoed by the Centaurians. He bases his extraordinary inference upon the appearance of these people; says they're Romans clear through, and grew bilious because I called the Centaurians barbarians, hinting he'd got his tribes mixed. I wasn't aware there were any Romans missing." Sheldon chuckled at the recollection and "supposed" the argument would last the whole time they were in this part of the world.

Saunders's idea concerning the origin of the Centaurians was certainly diverting, still not impossible. But we, not the Romans, discovered this wonderful new continent, and the superb Centaurians are a product of their own magnificent land. These tall, powerful men were god-like in their perfect beauty with their close-cropped curls, strong necks and massive shoulders; but it did go against me to see the great muscular arms heavily braceletled.

Tolna, linking his arm in mine, informed me the journey was nearly at an end. We strolled out upon deck, everybody followed, and a quiver of excitement passed through all as a hoarse shout wafted up from the earth. The ship began rolling, and I experienced an uncomfortable sensation as it suddenly slanted down from the wind and through a damp, chilling cloud, then what an extraordinary, magnificent sight met the eye. Beneath, visible as in broad day, white, brilliant with lights, lay the

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remarkable, dazzling city of Latonia. Shining mosques, odd, cone-shaped domes, delicate spiral towers reared majestically to infinite heights, tinging the heavens with flaring, gigantic sprays of brilliancy. Through vivid reflections the broad avenues of this flashing city were plainly visible, black with a crowding, yelling mob that rent the air with deafening shouts as the gradually drooping ship gently settled upon a high steel trestle.

We were hurried down spidery steel steps and through an avenue of guards, but hastily uncovered before the wild cheers of the crowd that pressed forward. There was a rush, the guards gave way, we were seized, hoisted high, and carried to the waiting carriage, where a splendid old party stood smiling a welcome. With one hand he held in check the six restive horses, the other he extended to Saxe. The noise, confusion, was so great it was impossible to hear anything said, but we knew this was the Governor of Latonia, and saluted deeply. The fine, old gentleman gave us each a kindly greeting, then was obliged to turn his attention to the prancing, impatient horses, as they suddenly plunged into the crowd, which stamped, but quickly closed in the rear and raced after us, cheering. We shouted back, waving our caps, while the delighted Latonians fiercely pelted us with flowers.

Once or twice the Governor raised his arm in protest, but the four scientists from the other side of the globe commanded the whole attention. The speeding horses soon outdistanced the crowd and suddenly swerved down a wide, peaceful boulevard.

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Dazed with excitement, we hardly noticed this wonderful city of bizarre architecture except that it blazed in a continual glare. The streets were all of unyielding stone, and thronged with people, people, people—in the gardens, doorways, windows, even clinging to the house-tops—who cheered lustily as we clattered past and frantically waved gay streamers and peculiar white flags, ornamented with a single, glaring, yellow star.

Gallantly we saluted this strange emblem of Centauri.

The Governor's palace, situated in the heart of the city, was a great, clumsy, stone structure, of many gables and towers, surrounded by a park of stately oaks. The tolling of countless bells signaled our arrival, the tall gates flew wide, and the horses dashed up a broad, graveled road. People hurried from all parts of the park to see us as the Governor escorted us to the great domed hall, where he bestowed upon us the embrace of welcome, then personally conducted us to our apartments. He placed his palace at our disposal, and gave strict orders concerning our comfort (the moon was ours for the asking), then turned us over to an army of attendants. These people seemed rather timid of us at first and deferentially sounded our inclinations regarding the bath. As we exhibited a lively interest in the subject they lost no further time about the matter, but hurried us down vast columned halls and corridors, and finally ushered us to a pavilion gardened with countless strange, tropical plants. A deep rippling brook gently caressed the soggy edge

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of a steep mossy bank, and down this soft incline we recklessly tumbled and rolled, hauling and mauling each other, and simultaneously plunged into the water with a tremendous splash—the water was tepid and stinging. Saxe. suggested it was the salt, but Saunders was positive we bathed in fresh water, while Sheldon declared it was lime, and these advanced people wished to do away with us to get possession of the car. It was certainly a villainous plot. But we emerged from the plunge with tingling, glistening skins, and meekly submitted to the severe rubbing down that even a pugilist would balk against. Swathed in fleecy wool, we were hustled through a panel door, down a winding, oven-heated alley, which led, in some mysterious way, direct to our apartments. They handled us like toys, these cast-iron people, and quickly assisted us into fresh clothing—the costume of Centauri, which suited us well, though Sheldon whined that he felt naked. Saxe. and Saunders bothered continually about the chemicals contained in the bath, and quizzed the attendants, who pretended not to understand; both however declared they felt as fresh as daisies and good for all night.

“No doubt,” said Sheldon, “freshness is proverbial with daisies, though I’ve seen many that reeked the other way; but recollect everything on this side is six centuries ahead, even to the water, and the Centaurians seem pretty rapid. That stiff, old chap, the Governor, is going to let us in for some tall doings.”

Saxe. flushed angrily as I snickered approval of

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Sheldon's flippancy, but was forced to postpone his bristling rebuke as a sedate, but very nervous individual, entered, bowing profoundly and announced in scarcely audible tones something about "Governor," and "waiting." We followed the gentleman of nerves, who seemed greatly distressed because we looked at him. He ushered us to the great dining hall, then escaped with remarkable agility.

A feast awaited us, long tables spread with snowy, sheeny cloth; rich, tropical fruit heaped high in wide, golden salvers, pasty sweets, jellied viands, crowned with the aroma of punch—it was a congenial atmosphere. The rooms were crowded with guests, who watched us with delighted expectancy as Tolna advanced to meet us.

"Not a woman in sight!" muttered Sheldon. "Somebody had a dream like this once and woke up, crowing he'd been in hell!"

Divining Sheldon's grumble Tolna explained the ladies had retired. He would not detain us long, as he wished us to rest, for at day-break, according to orders, we were to be conveyed to Centur, and presented to "The Centauri."

Introductions followed. We were separated in the gathering about the tables. Sheldon joined the representatives of the National Geographical-Geological societies. Saunders bossed things among the astronomers, and Saxe. was the center of an odd-looking, crowding group. I was tolled off to the Sports of Latonia, there was no doubt about it, either—they *were* Sports.

The wine passed freely. Ye gods! wine that re-

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quired years to season the system. I drank sparingly, indulging in luscious fruit, yet did I become light-headed and lost prudence. I was the gayest of the swift band and boisterously outsang them all. How they did laugh! And their jokes! Ouch! leveled at me! Each ardently drank to the beauties of Centauri, then all declared some angel waited my return to the other side. Their mirth grew wild, noisy, as my face flushed, the blood rushed to my brain, wine roused desire. I sprang up, overturning the chair in my eagerness and twirling my goblet high, shouted: "I drink to the glorious eycs of my inamorata, Alpha Centauri!"

The effect was startling and enough to sober any man. A pall of silence fell upon the guests deeper than the polar stillness and in profound respect all rose stiff, erect as soldiers, murmuring in hushed, reverential tones the name: "Alpha Centauri."

I was astonished, yet positive of some mistake. These men could not possibly know of the myth that had lured me to this land, gallantly complimenting their fair country, I, at the same time had been chivalrous to the hidden passion. There was some mistake, and I laughed at their solemnity, again raising my goblet: "To the beauty of my enchantress, Alpha Centauri!" I sang out, but in lower, gentler tones.

What ailed them? All bowed respectfully, but not one touched his glass. Then the Governor, who was at the far end of the table, raised his glass level with his eyes and slowly turned it in a circle. "Gentlemen," he spoke in tones almost de-

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vout, "with the fiery young stranger, I drink to the most wise, divine—Alpha Centauri!"

At once all goblets were raised and drained, then in silence the gentlemen reseated themselves. Merriment was stifled, I alone remained standing, sobered—but when was I ever wise.

"I drank to a myth," I cried; "a vision of my brain that tortured and lured me beyond the Pole. May I inquire whom you gentlemen honor?"

Again the Governor rose and replied: "We drank to Alpha Centauri, the future ruler of the world, the most wonderful woman in the universe, resolute, brilliant, mysterious as the star from whence she came—Alpha Centauri."

My goblet fell with a thud. I tried to recover it and caught the table to steady myself. At once all was confusion, a sea of blurred faces surrounded me. "Give him water, he's had enough wine!" rang the familiar tones of Saxe. Immediately the weakness left me and Sheldon's hoarse whisper forced me to smile. "The myth realized—if she only looks as she appeared; but she won't, old boy, she won't! It's some old jade with a hair-lip. Beautiful women were created to be adored, never to rule." He chuckled audibly as I pushed him aside.

Tolna offered me wine, but Saxe compelled me to drink a whole goblet of water, then in a way all his own, which no one could take offence at, he intimated the day had been long, fatiguing, and suggested the merrymakers continue without the presence of the four strangers.

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Tolna regretted, the others crowded about us, but finally with many salutes we were escorted from the hall.

When we were alone Saxe. advised and warned me, and Saunders shook his head. "To think it should come true!" he muttered.

"Yes," said Saxe., "your vision is mortal. You will realize what is denied to most. All have ideals, those are rare that are realized."

"Don't congratulate him yet, boys," chimed in Sheldon; "wait till the 'ideal' materializes, perhaps then he'll want our sympathies. And, Sally, did you really believe in the vision? But of course you did; the effect was powerful; you gave up everything to join us."

"I loved!" I cried, all aflame. "Sometimes I believed, again doubted; but all the time I loved, and that leads anywhere, most often to hell!"

Saxe. threw up his hands in protest. He was not a profane man, and Saunders suggested we retire.

Our room was spacious, luxurious, divided into four by tall granite columns. The furniture was rich, but weighty in effect, and fantastically carved; the beds were long, narrow and heavily padded; we sank deep in softness, inhaling a sleep producing odor, sweet, sensuous.

Drowsily Sheldon uttered a gruesome joke, and Saxe. yawned his preference for the bunks of his car.

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### CHAPTER XI.

We were awakened at daybreak, all seemed excitement and bustle, and with little ceremony we were served in our room with a dainty breakfast of delicately browned fish, fruit, and tea brewed from freshly gathered leaves. Then they conducted us to the garden where Tolna and the Governor waited. Both gentlemen greeted us with many polite inquiries concerning our rest, then impressively informed us that during the night "The Centauri" had arrived, impatient to meet the four illustrious explorers, the brave men who dared the horrors of the north for the benefit of science.

"You will be his guests," Tolna informed us; "and in his superb ship return with him to Centur."

We bowed deeply, while the young gentleman beckoned to a man who was leading a sextette of prancing horses, three abreast, harnessed to a queer vehicle, a cross between a chariot and hotel bus.

The Governor entered, we followed with Tolna, who hurried forward and caught the reins. The horses arched and high-stepped a bit to show their mettle, then dashed into a gallop and clattered noisily through the quiet streets, sombre with the silence of dawn. Windows were raised, tousled heads, sleepy faces, leaned far out to see and cheer us, but the road was clear, no swaying, pushing mob. Our departure was altogether unexpected.

We reached the sheds as full day flooded the

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city. A ship, small, elegant, glistened in the sunlight like silver. Several gentlemen loitered at the foot of the steps, evidently waiting for us. We were presented, then hurried aboard. The Governor, in parting, assured us repeatedly that we would meet again. Tolna handed me a small parcel, his eyes pleading acceptance. Saxe. could boast no longer, I was the happy possessor of a bracelet also, composed of jade with three huge opals sunk in the stone. With a hand-clasp I signified my appreciation, and Tolna locked it upon the upper portion of my arm. We were deferentially escorted to the upper deck, which was carpeted with soft, rich material, deadening footsteps. Advancing to meet us with outstretched arms and a wonderfully kind smile was a tall, powerful, magnificent old man. Saxe. gave an exclamation which ended in a sigh. We all bowed in reverence. He welcomed us. His voice had the melodious sweetness of the flute. He invited us to his cabin, and I stared in awe at "The Centauri" of all Centauri.

A long, patriarchal beard flowed over his breast; thick, snowy curls reached to his shoulders. He was much darker than the average Centaurian, with deep, piercing, magnetic, black eyes gleaming beneath heavy black brows. He studied us each in turn, and strange, the silence did not embarrass. While the deep eyes were riveted upon me, unconcernedly I examined the barbaric splendor of the room.

The odd-shaped furniture glistened like crystal. There were chairs with fluted, shell-shaped backs,

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cushioned in delicate pink, others molded in forms of twisted, entwined reptiles, cushioned in chameleon green; the effect rather created chills. There were couches, divans, heaped high with soft, downy head-rests, the prevailing color white; and over the whole atmosphere pervaded a sweet, almost nauseating odor. Centauri ended the silence addressing Saxe., who in spite of his wonderful self-control, appeared flurried.

"Your invention is remarkable, considering the era in which you live, but superior to your inventive genius was the fabulous idea you treasured that beyond the pivot another world existed. Your forceful nature, powerful intellect, energy, labored to attain ambition. Such men always succeed." Saxe. bowed. "I have thoroughly examined your car," Centauri continued; "it belongs to the people and will be placed in the museum at Centur. The government will present you with an engine perfected with the improvements of centuries, yet you will easily recognize your own machine. A great error was made in the use of steel; had your instrument been molded in crystal, explosion would have been impossible, and you would have discovered us earlier and avoided many hardships."

Saxe. saluted low and sweeping, but was mute. Centauri gazed steadily at him several seconds, then as though satisfied, turned his attention to Sheldon, who became a lively pink.

"The great, fresh water ocean was discovered centuries ago. Your theory concerning the earth's fresh water supply is erroneous."

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Sheldon, who was minus the bump of reverence, sharply asked: "In what way, sir?"

Centauri smiled pleasantly. "When we reach Centur," he said, "I will turn you over to the Geologists, who will conduct you to view this ocean which surges in an unfathomable hollow of the Otega, the highest mountain in the world. It is of volcanic origin, and floods the lakes, rivers, etc., only in its immediate vicinity."

"Nonsense!" snapped Sheldon, regardless of everything, "I've delved too deeply in the anatomy of subterranean flows to blunder. Through great arteries in the heart of the earth this water rushes, flooding countless natural reservoirs, and continually creating new ones. I shall positively prove my statements before returning to my own country."

"All the latest appliances of science shall be placed at your disposal," said Centauri. "Should your assertions prove correct, the discovery will be vastly beneficial to the Centaurians. I wish you success."

He turned to Saunders, opening conversation about the star, "Virgilius." "It is not a planet, nor yet a star," he told Saunders, who was all respectful attention, "but a moon of immeasurable dimension and illusive distance, the after-film of a monstrous, stricken world, gradually dissolving midst the ether of our sphere, yet completely beyond the radius of your continent; but were it not the shadowy rays must fail absolutely to penetrate the thick atmosphere laden with minute life which you people inhale. The Centaurians dare not stray

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over the sharp ice summit, the poisonous disease-inflicting vapors cause instant death. We of this land exist in a purer, clearer atmosphere. The sun, moon and stars have no dense, fetid veil to pierce, their beneficial rays bestow miraculous strength and rare longevity. When crossing the earth's summit you experienced a terrible weakening of vital force, an intense absorption almost resulting in disaster, yet immediately escaping the dreaded circle all underwent startling rejuvenation, a sudden strong pulsation of restored vigor and energy—glorious Centauri is discovered. Many animals from your continent have strayed over the unknown regions, queer, stunted, hornless dogs, and weazened birds of marvelous plumage. Instinct forced these creatures to continual advancement, while man, bumptuous in semi-civilization and faltering, immature reason, invariably retrace travel the instant the geyser pivot is sighted to perish miserably in the stampede to the Reflection mountains. In your world undoubtedly progress is rapid, but never will an instrument be invented sufficiently powerful to pierce the vapory substance you call atmosphere for one ray of that mysterious, shadowy disc so plainly visible in rarified Centauri. Professor, you have braved many perils simply to obtain knowledge strictly beneficial to yourself. Astronomers will accept your statements concerning the positive existence of the phenomenon they had vaguely located, but the desired enlightenment you wished to convey is forever concealed amid the blinding elements. Soaring into astral convictions

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is fleeting satisfaction and everlasting solitary despair."

Centauri's eyes actually twinkled, but Saunders was looking ugly. Like most mild men he was stubborn and began reply in his usual deliberate, argumentative manner.

"I regret I cannot agree with your views concerning this monstrosity of the heavens," he informed the great Centauri. "As I understand you, your knowledge of the oblong radiance is as limited as mine, yet you state positively, after declaring it of illusive distance, that it is a globe in the lunar state, a world in decline. This is most perplexing, but perhaps after further investigations I will agree with you. At present permit me to state the result of my very thorough calculations. This peculiar stellar formation I believe to be a new world developing and have named it the planet Virgilius. Its revolution through space is similar to Earth. Both planets present a lunar appearance to the other, and each globe casts a semi-eclipse over the other; hence, the planet Virgilius is invisible to astronomers of my country.

"The fetid mists, etc., enveloping only our portion of the globe is, you will pardon me, altogether visionary. Encircling Earth is the nebulous radiance visibly enveloping the whole planetary system. Within this nebulous is temperature, the chart of the elements divided into five zones. Centauri in her zones is subject to the same atmospheric influences that envelops our continent. Your inability to cross the polar circle is not due to contagious

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vapors ; the icy petrification, intangible, mystic calm of the unknown regions rouses a horrible, freezing fear, which causes fatal physical dread—you perish. Centauri, in frigid panic, eternally retreats, while wandering, enterprising unenlightenment discovers. But the Centaurians, with their extensive knowledge, vast researches and keen perception, realized the existence of far, unknown countries, populous, progressive. We of our land, ah! how widely different! Perception is still in the nebulous state, and centuries will elapse before tender intellect is sufficiently sinewy to grapple with the astounding problem that our own little hemisphere does not embrace the universe."

Saunders gravely bowed to the amazed and delighted old gentleman, whose eyes now snapped with merriment. We four certainly made a huge, square joke, but Saunders was game and Centauri smiled very kindly upon him.

"Later we shall have another discussion," he told him. "Now you are under a disadvantage. Possibly you will devote months, years, in extensive observation and limitless calculation—it will be interesting to hear all the extravagant new ideas you will form concerning the—er—planet Virgil-lius. That's what the Centaurians have been doing for ages—are still doing—and will continue to do forever. Form theories, theories always, never more. Baffled, they study this spectral lunar disc, enveloped in a halo of mystery that none can penetrate, but I, I who have solved intricate problems of the Known, and delved daringly into the Un-

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known, will, must pierce the denseness of those clouds whose form never vary."

Which proved that these wonderful people, with their vaunted centuries of superiority, had still to conquer the masterful passion for fame, and struggled even as—

Centauri mused and murmured to himself in rapt reverie, seemingly our presence completely forgotten, yet suddenly he turned his deep eyes upon me, his face beaming with a most engaging smile. Saunders and his planets were dismissed. He nodded approval, evidently pleased with my appearance.

"You are young, comely," he told me. "What science induced you to brave the northern perils?"

I flushed hotly, believing he ridiculed; a strange vehemence seized me. "A phantom, myth, a creation of my brain—what you will!" I cried eagerly. "I love, adore; the strength of my adoration will compel response! I will possess and realize—heaven!"

I flung out my arms in a paroxysm of desire, and Centauri stared in amazement, then spoke in severe, chilling tones, which quelled passion. "Your task is difficult, more difficult than those of your comrades. To them success is assured; you are doomed to failure. The Centaurians subdued emotion centuries ago; savages, beasts alone, are controlled by impulse. Self-government is sublime; civilization attains perfection when passion is obliterated."

He rose and, with a gesture, signified the interview at an end. I was the last to salute and in passing murmured: "I have hope."

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"A false sentiment," he replied. "Centauri is above and beyond you."

"My God!" I gasped, yet quick as a flash replied: "Centauri is a woman!"

His eyes burned into mine. "You are courageous," he whispered, then abruptly, yet without offence, shut the door almost in my face.

Outside, alone upon a misty deck, we stared blankly at each other; then Sheldon aired a grievance.

"We've permitted ourselves to be mauled about by this, that, and the other; to be taken here, there, anywhere, willy-nilly; we've almost lost our identity," he grumbled. "It is well we managed some spunk before 'The Centauri' who, by the way, is a shrewd old cuss, and gained power through the exaggerated estimate of the people—like many on our side. But he's a harmless old chap, on the decade. Look sharp about the girl, Sally. He warned you of that himself. She's a tar-tar, and as homely as sin—there's a great disappointment sure. Squelch the flame, think of gain; domineering selfishness is a powerful magnet."

"Notice how he mentioned the planet Virgilius?" squeaked Saunders. "Why, for all his boasted knowledge he knows little more of the planet than I do."

"And," sputtered Sheldon, "he claimed the great body of fresh water for the Centaurians, called it 'Tegao,' or something——."

"Good heavens, boys!" murmured Saxe., "have

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more respect for our host, he is Centauri, the Great One!"

"Fiddle! he flung bouquets at you, Saxe!" retorted Sheldon. "He'll have the government present you with an advanced *Propellier*—invented centuries ago by himself—all for towing us safely across the Pole. Traveling in crystal won't be bad—I'll be in full possession of the fresh water supply, Saunders'll have his star fenced in, and Sally—well—er—Sally will have nothing to show—a dead romance—sweet remembrance—and a devout thankfulness he's well out of it."

"Say, don't worry about me," I cried; "and—drop the subject all around. The Centaurians are great people, their reception of us was superb, and criticising them not quite up to—er—par. For instance," I concluded, pointing to the clouds enveloping us, "admire the—ahem!—scenery."

"Yes, oh, yes; scenery!" mocked Sheldon:

" 'Clouds above,  
Clouds to the left,  
Clouds in front of us,  
Vollied and thundered.'

Heard that years ago at a club entertainment—great thing, club entertainments—something from 'The Dandy Fifth,' recited by a badly frightened female who, at regular intervals, bawled: 'Hurry, oh, hurry!' Fine thing 'The Dandy Fifth.' "

"Now I wonder why it's necessary to travel in these clouds?" Saunders testily inquired. Sheldon

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was about to reply wittily when several hurrying forms loomed up through the mist. We were conducted to the lower deck and into a gorgeous dining-room where refreshments of fruit, heavy little cakes and mild wine was served, including the information that Centur would be reached one hour after noon. We were shown every courtesy and greatly entertained by the brilliant wit of these men—but we learned nothing. It is wonderful how much can be said with so little imparted, but Saunders finally losing patience, testily inquired why we traveled so high in the clouds, and expressed a wish to view the earth we sailed over. At once orders were given for the lowering of the ship and amid bellowed commands and uneasy sounds of tightening, straining cables, and whirring, fluttering sails, the ship suddenly slanted sickeningly, waveringly floated, then gradually resumed the former swift, even travel, and we were invited on deck.

A gale was blowing, whistling, shrieking icily through the riggings. We sailed over a vast ocean of mountainous waves whose spray dashed high, forming a wall of vapor reaching the clouds. The sensation was terrifying, elevated in this dense moisture. The roaring ocean beneath and oppressive, leaden clouds above—a terrifying insecurity impressive of our insignificance. What are we after all? Mere species of atom forming this turbulent system of entirety.

My friends, unusually silent, thoughtful, and shivering with nervousness, gloomily listened to the affably confident Centaurians.

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"The damned thing'll cut capers and it's all over with us!" muttered Sheldon. Even as he spoke the ship, like a meteor, shot through the red-black funnel cloud gathering and deepening in front of us and swayed in a swimming darkness of thunderous detonation whose sulphurous denseness suddenly dissolved before vivid streaks of blinding green eruption—the next instant the sun streamed upon us with furnace rays and land was beneath, a gloriously beautiful country, seemingly smiling wide in welcome. Buoyantly we feasted our eyes upon the wondrous panorama, as with lightning speed we flew over city after city, gleaming white, glistening in the brilliant sunlight. Rivers, lakes rippled and sparkled in wavy lines like gleaming streaks of ore. Snow-capped peaks cut the pale, distant azure, and beyond stretched miles of prairie land. Our attention was directed to a vast plain, and through powerful glasses we viewed the encampment of a mighty army. Soldiers in shining armor marched into the open, filing rank upon rank into glittering divisions.

"The camp of the Potolilis," we were informed. "A formidable tribe of savages at present warring upon the Octrogonas, who, though they outnumber yonder tribe three to one, are routed continually by the insidious Potolilis."

The speaker delivered an oration upon the ruinous policy of war while the ship veered easterly, sailing swiftly from the martial scene, over extensive forests, rich valleys, and in the heat of the mid-day sun slackened speed, floating gently over

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the loveliest bay I ever saw whose deep-blue, glassy waters reflected elongated, fantastic shadows of the great white city on the coast gleaming phantom-like through a shroud of heavy, azure mist. Borne before the mild breeze, we fluttered to the heart of this fair city, hovering an instant in the high, intense heat, then the ship slanted and circled downward.

Beneath was the reality of a dream-vision. A fairy palace glinted in the sunlight with soft, rainbow tints, surrounded with gorgeous gardens sheltered from the wilting heat by giant palms, and cooled, refreshed by swift, ribboned streams, and slumberous pools upon whose surface floated strange, heavy-scented blossoms.

The vessel shifted far to the rear of the irradiating palace toward the outskirts of the wondrous gardens, where a steel trestle reared high, supporting a great, oblong object, which slowly parted wide. The ship sank without a jar, gently settling, the sails folded close while the huge metal shell gradually closed together. The flying ship *Centur* had reached port.

Leisurely we strolled through the heavenly gardens, lingering in admiration of the witching picturesqueness. We were told that exquisite *Centur* was the divine city of Centauri—ahem! and that we were the guests of Alpha Centauri, who would receive us some time after sunset; the exciting interval, we understood, was to be devoted to rest. The gentleman graciously gave us further information concerning the greatness and exclusiveness of our

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hostess. We learned Alpha Centauri was sweet, merciful, divine and the true ruler of this grand race. The venerable Centauri existed in his laboratory. He was revered as the father of the people, whose ancestors were the first and only rulers of the earth.

"Not as king or chief," the gentleman hastened to explain, "but just one mighty man at the head of the nation whose wisdom, simplicity in ruling brought plenty, peace and happiness. The knowledge of the Great Family is far-reaching, a vast heirloom guarded, treasured above all their possessions—they are protégés of the Sun, and worshipped by all Centauri."

The speaker clasped his hands piously. We stared, amazed, though respect for the cleverness of Old Centauri bounded to the limit.

"Veiled Prophet and pretty Priestess," muttered Sheldon.

"Wonder how he does it?" Saxe. murmured.

"Humbug!" I whispered.

From a cool, shaded grove of tall, slender trees with silvery leaves, we unexpectedly stepped into a narrow, mossy path, leading to a wide, stately piazza, with broad, sloping, velvety lawns, surrounding a great fairy palace of three domes, delicate spires and strange zigzag balconies flashing myriad tints in the glaring hot sunshine; a bizarre structure, out of all proportion, with queer, protruding circular rooms, and high, broad windows facing every direction; a palatial sun-dwelling whose architectural incongruity was submerged in royal magnificence.

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We entered the columned vestibule, cool, lofty, lit with uncertain tints, and almost saluted a marvelously sculptured form near the entrance. A fatherly individual greeted us, then immediately conducted us to our apartments. Silently we followed down the broad arched hall, up wide, flat stairways, carpeted with silver-gray softness, and were ushered to our quarters. A suite of five rooms, four sleeping apartments and a sitting-room reserved for criticisms, which forethought proved the superior perceptiveness of these advanced people. Following prevalent customs of our land we'd been separated as far apart as the Poles, and not till we'd escaped could we get together close enough to compare notes and whisper of the invariable peculiarities of surroundings.

Ruby-tinted wine, heavy, hard to carry; luscious fruit and strange nuts were served to us with a delicately-flavored cigar, which proved exceptionally inviting, creating the visionary and a decided distaste for conversation, then a sudden, acute realization of fatigue and finally compelling slumber. Faintly I heard Sheldon mutter something about "sleep producing weed," but in numb indifference I soared beyond this sphere of sordid events, slumbering for hours. The evening was well advanced when my three friends awakened me, crowing, yes, crowing, because their sleep ended before mine.

"And on the eve of beholding the divinity," Sheldon chirped. I sprang up as the room suddenly flared with light and several attendants entered.

"To make us beautiful," Sheldon remarked.

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We were shaved, perfumed and attired in gorgeous raiment. The customary suit of black, which I preferred, would have created a sensation, but we looked rather well. Saxe was superb in purple, wearing Octroogona's armlet of emeralds, and the strange ring of Potolili gleamed upon his hand. Sheldon imagined himself fascinating in claret-shaded folds, and Saunders in a gray toga, sniffed at us disdainfully. I strutted, satisfied, arrayed in white with a rich ornamental border of gold. The finery polished up our tarnished gallantry, yet each felt an inward quivering excitement which we vainly strove to conceal in personalities. I twitted them all for their conceit—they were not a bad looking trio—retaliation was fierce. Sheldon, being a lady's man, threw out his chest and dark hints concerning the end of the week wherein a certain “smarty” would be wondering what he came over here for and he (Sheldon) would be the bright, shining light of the quartette.

Our fun hushed as a magnificent individual entered, bowing ceremoniously. He gave his name, which we immediately forgot when he stated he came to conduct us to Her Graciousness, Alpha Centauri.

God! I felt the hot flush rush to my head, then ebb away, and shuddered with sudden chill. Sheldon, ever alert for mischief, glanced my way sharply, then declared I turned the famous “ashen hue,” though he could see no occasion for alarm—there were others—the fair Alpha might—ahem! And twirled his little old mustachios, and leered.

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Saxe. took my arm, murmuring encouragingly, while the splendid stranger smiled warmly, sympathetically, and not at all like a party who had burned all his passions centuries ago.

We hurried down the columned hall, brilliant with reflecting lights gleaming from panel and dome. Low, sweet music greeted our ears, and judging by the hubbub there were many people waiting to meet us. Through wide arched entrances we caught glimpses of a great banquet hall, whose mirrored walls reflected myriad hues flashing upon jewels of gorgeously attired guests. A dazzling scene of fabulous grandeur alcoved with a background like a gigantic painting; a dimly-lit miniature forest stretched wide beyond, restful, quieting, in rich green tints, and the refreshing splash of perfumed fountains cooled the air.

We stepped within this radiant magnificence. At once conversation ceased, all eyes were focused upon us. But I—ah!—was oblivious to all things; my whole attention chained to the tall, statuesque form of a woman. Masses of jetty, rippling tresses reached the hem of her gown, and perched upon her head, yet fitting closely, revealing perfect outlines, was a cap of dull gold ornamented with slender spikes, a huge gem flashing in the center. She turned and quickly advanced. We bowed low before the majestic dignity of her bearing. And the face! divine, beautiful, darkly tinted, heavy-browed, with deep, strange eyes, whose cold, meaningless, unresponsive stare flashed a dead chill to my heart. God! how common, matter-of-fact the world suddenly ap-

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peared. That one moment of terrible disappointment corrupted forever the divine imagery of my heaven. Oh, the folly of looking forward to realizing the crimson vividness of our imagination with Hope, dazzling white, ever circling mid the black dizziness of Disappointment. Yet a life overlooked by these profound calamities is an existence of deepest damnation. But the phantom that roused an idyllic passion stood revealed, and the sombre, chilling orbs were powerfully magnetic. Robed in clinging white, barbarously decked with blazing jewels, she repelled, yet fascinated, compelling the gaze.

She greeted Saxe. with a voice of music, low, sweet, each word distinct. I gasped with the sudden bound my heart gave and clutched Sheldon, as she smiled, then threw back her head with a light laugh. Something Saxe. said amused her. The roseate, smiling phantom was realized; and ecstatically, passionately, with burning, delighted glances, I watched this regal, glorious woman, my first disappointment completely forgotten.

“Easy, easy,” Sheldon murmured. “Don’t blame you, but easy, easy. I——” He saluted deeply the radiant welcome she gave him, and I—I raised her hand to my lips, kissing it twice, thrice. It closed over mine, cold, firm. She watched my action calmly, gravely, passionless; and I, my ardor chilled, remained speechless with emotion.

She was an imperfect woman—a rare blossom blighted before full bloom—hard, freezing, as the terrible ice mountains I had crossed to meet her.

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Imperiously she bade me follow her. We were alone, my three friends having wisely strolled away. She led to the alcoved greenery, heavy with the sweet, powerful odor of wonderful exotic plants.

Silently we wandered beneath tall palms and trees of thick foliage, whose branches housed gorgeously plumed, shrill songsters.

I plucked a deep crimson flower and attempted to place it in her hair. She stood quite still, but the task was beyond me. In exasperation I crushed the blossom, then stooping, suddenly pressed a kiss upon the lovely shoulder. She turned sharply.

"What's the difference!" I cried passionately. "With my eyes I kiss you constantly!"

"Pretty boy," she murmured musingly. "I have seen you before. I do not remember where."

I cursed my lack of control as she led me into the glare of brilliant lights again and bade me be seated at a small table in full view of the fantastically garbed banqueters.

Sheldon was seated between two beautiful women, and all in his vicinity were convulsed with laughter. He was proving himself a wit even among these advanced people. Saunders was explaining something of vast importance. I could almost hear his nasal, biliary tones; and dear old Saxe had the seat of honor. He had cleared a space in front of him, and with his forefinger was drawing marvelous circles and triangles upon the satiny damask, his every movement watched closely by eager, enthusiastic admirers.

A brilliant scene, this banquet hall, with its crys-

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tal walls flashing blinding lights, and I, my senses drugged with the sensuous ether of this rich, tropical idyl, served with strange delicacies and rare wines, basking in the intoxicating smiles of a glorious dream-vision, whose eyes were more potent than wine—Centauri! Yes; a marvelous picture, a masterpiece of the fabulous whose wonderful unreality was before me, yet—I realized. And for all the splendor of rioting radiance and hilarious music a heavy gloom overwhelmed me, a dull foreboding of the future, a glimpse of a great sorrow, a blighted life. The dark shadow of awakening obscured the vast, soft-tinted halo—my dream was not Paradise, nor was the enchantress an angel. She and all her world were now aware why I crossed the frigid north—to pluck the fairest blossom from a garden of rare flowers.

She conversed in low tones, her words few, just clever, tactful encouragement. She drew me out, rousing the best in me. The familiar conversational meaningless chatter had no place here. Alpha Centauri differed widely from the women of my world. I longed to tear from her face the stony mask that so marred its beauty. In my hopelessly enamoured state I swore it was a mask, yet beneath my searching, ardent gaze she calmly questioned.

With astonishing eloquence I described that portion of the globe from whence I hailed, which, divided into numerous nations, cordially hated each other with a hatred bred in the blood and concealed in the blatant roar of deadly patriotism—the terrible, unspeakable carnage of warfare. I dwelled long

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upon the beautiful, and Art, and the great strides made in mechanism. I talked for hours, it seemed. I told her of my life, my great wealth and many, many disappointments, and had reached that point in my career when the vision of herself had appeared. She was intensely interested, leaning dangerously near, while the expression of her deep eyes made me reckless. Passion mastered. I caught her hand and pressed my lips upon palm and wrist, while in broken tones I told of my love.

"I worship you!" I murmured huskily. "I love, adore you!"

She gazed perplexed, yet a reflection of my passion shone in her glance; a reflection only, then she smiled, faintly amused.

"Love," she murmured. "What is love? A woman, a child, or a fancy? Once, centuries ago," she continued, "love ruled Centauri; now knowledge reigns supreme; the master of the universe."

"Without love life is imperfect," I hastened to assure her.

She looked puzzled, curious.

"I do not understand," she muttered. "All know of Love, but no one ever experienced it. Centuries ago this dead science had many students. You must visit the museum, Virgilius; it contains many rare works of art. There are three gigantic sculptured forms that absorb the attention. Two are particularly noticeable for crudeness, representing Art in the primitive beautiful. They were discovered in the caves of the Ocastas, and have been traced back 5,000 years. Each represents Love, one

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a woman of immense, but perfect proportions; the other a winged child. The third is an enormous statue revealing the touch of genius, stationed near the others, possibly for contrast to prove the progress of Art. Exquisite in perfection, every line and curve wrought by a master's hand, a man and woman smile upon each other out of shapeless stone, her lovely head rests upon his massive shoulders, his arms clasp her perfect form closely. Art has progressed little since then and now is rapidly approaching the abnormal. From these three monstrous carvings we judge, hence: Love is a primitive desire; Fancy, a cultivation of early civilization, and Knowledge crowns all. I would know more of this powerful, forceful science that once controlled the world."

She rose and moved slowly toward the dim interior of this leafy retreat and sank upon a mossy bank near the refreshing coolness of perfumed waters. I flung myself at her feet. A huge instrument resembling a harp was wheeled towards her. It had two sets of golden wires in a casement of crystal. Her white hands strayed idly over the wires—the vision in the burning globe was before me—then under her powerful touch a volume of music rang—sweet, wild melody, and she who declared Love a dead science portrayed upon her instrument all the emotions of the human heart. Deep tones of passion thrilled and trembled, the strident howl of rage, hatred; the laugh of envy, the wail of anguish, all rang out clearly beneath her inspired touch. I gazed at her in doubt and

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amusement. Perceiving my glance she murmured: "Knowledge's tuition is: All emotions have their note of melody, rhythm."

"You worship Knowledge," I told her; "you can adore man."

"I know nothing of your country," she replied: "yet in your far zone, centuries ago, there were customs that never could be re-established—you have progressed above them. This strange sentiment you uphold is not of the intellect, the children of Centauri are followers of the divine light blessed with calmness, peace."

"Love still rules Centauri; your own words prove it!" I exclaimed stubbornly. "Knowledge is bait. You people are greatly advanced, but in love the whole world is equal. Pride, ambition, seeks Wisdom. We upon our side also bend the knee to Elevation. The passion for Fame, Glory is supreme. Love is the title for a thousand emotions—Greed, Wealth, Position—and sacrificial crimes are committed hourly to obtain them. Then there is the much-vaunted maternal love, the most unreliable of all instincts. I have known the life of a daughter made miserable, the sweet freshness of youth blighted in cynical thoughts roused by a pretty, passé, selfish, knife-tongued mother. Maternal affection! bah! it ceases the moment individuality is attained, thrusting aside yokish, slavish control. Show me the human being who appreciates the monstrous favor of birth. Is the Innocent responsible for creative desire? Yet not till dissolution does Result escape the harpy Reminder. There is

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the soul-inspiring passion for the One Woman—a grand affair of a few days, chiefly experienced in this metallic period by very young girls, very old men and, occasionally for relaxation, a staid family man indulges—!!! I could talk for months upon this theme; it could never be exhausted; but you, Centauri, I worship! love as no man ever loved! I will be patient, wait years, if in the end I can teach you to truthfully say: 'Virgillius, I love you.' " She gazed at me wonderingly.

"To experience this marvelous sensation, to master the art of love I would study years; for all things I must know. Strange," she continued, "this absorbing science should have become obsolete."

Suddenly she leaned closer, her great eyes blazed, her face paled with intensity. "Of your journey across the Pole," she whispered, "you must tell me minutely; the atmospheric influences, the state of the land, the great fiery geyser shooting up from the bowels of the earth. In the privacy of my rooms you will describe everything. I, Alpha, noted for her wisdom, would remedy, overpower the evils of nature. The benighted pivot regions shall become habitable. I will control the atmosphere. The laws of creation are desecrated by that monstrous icy waste. Earth is the vast estate of humanity, and the mystery, richness of that world of frigid savageness was destined for progression to conquer. I shall realize the stupendous ambition of civilization. The reward? Immortality, ah, immortality!"

She arose, erect in her superb pride and the flow

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of language was magnificent in the lengthy scientific explanation she gave of how she intended to vanquish the sleeping north. I was not sufficiently familiar with the language to follow her clearly, but this I did understand, were I not so desperately enamoured I certainly would have found her tedious. All intensely intellectual women are tedious. The idea of love is always more poignant than love, and I realized the task of teaching this strange creature the science of affection would be a heavy one.

Softly, musingly, she continued her learned explanations. Science absorbed her; the exquisite flower face grew cold, hard, expressionless. My romantic imagination lingered around this beautiful, fascinating enigma, illusive, desirable, yet every word she uttered forced the realization of an infinite barrier of remoteness—a phantom ever. But we can ardently worship the moon, and my rapt gaze finally drew her attention. Slowly she passed her hand over her brow, then abruptly asked if I comprehended all she said.

“Every word,” I replied gallantly.

“Then I must see you again,” she told me.

I sprang to my feet in alarm. “Was it not your intention to see me again?” I asked.

“I encounter new faces daily,” she answered. “They sail from my vision as the clouds overhead. You have interested me. I have mentioned the secret—my daring secret—from you I can learn much that is important. Yes, I must see you again.”

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"I am to teach you the lost science," I murmured, going close; "you have not forgotten?"

She glanced vaguely, then suddenly leaning toward me laughed softly, while her whisper thrilled. "Already I am learning the art of Love—it begins with attraction, sympathy; ends with ennui. Should the student survive these three emotions he has achieved the entralling, submerging flame of desire. Each atom of humanity is a world in itself, a shell covering of volcanic emotions; passion is the eruption, fierce, unwholesome, fleeting, leaving a wide swath of cinderous reflections tossed by the violent current of zephyric reason and gradually uplifted to the celestial heights of serenity, repose. Virgilius, we shall study together, for I must know all things. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I think I do," I told her; "and you have naught to learn except experience. This I shall compel you to realize, thereby giving you a dim perception of heaven and hell."

With half closed eyes she smiled. "We have talked hours, Virgilius, and said nothing. I can tarry with you no longer; on the morrow we shall meet again."

"I have been very happy," I whispered.

"Happy!" she cried incredulously. "Since creation the Centauris have been searching for happiness and believe when all mysteries are solved the chimera is theirs."

"My happiness is with you, Centauri!" I cried passionately. "I love you! I love you!"

She shook her head as though I was a spoiled

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child, then with a sweet, insinuating smile, departed. Rapturously I feasted my eyes upon her as she joined the guests, she the radiant, dazzling center of a bevy of bewitching beauties. I was consumed with ardent longings and flashed dangerous glances at Her Sereness, but gay, exhilarating music wafting in from the gardens roused me from languorous meditations, and out of the dim, heavy-odored retreat into the brilliant, chameleon-glinting hall, scintillating with mirth and wit.

Bold, debonair, I joined the revelers—how exquisitely fair were the women of this strange land!

I found Saxe. flushed with wine, haranguing learnedly and emphasizing his remarks with sweeping gestures. The subject was beyond my comprehension, but the intellectual circle about him were absorbed. Saxe. monopolized their attention entirely. He informed me before I left the group that he had made engagements, including the four of us, for the following day and told me to advise the others of it.

I strayed over to Sheldon, who was in his element making others happy. He was the center of a jovial set, and judging by the gayety was certainly amusing. I was too deeply in love to perceive the point of his jests, and out of my sphere sought Saunders, after learning, to my dismay, that Sheldon also had made engagements including all of us for the following day. Saunders, to my thinking, was the least interesting of the quartette. He had assumed his stilted, speech-making manner, and was lecturing on the hazy, mystic

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beauties of the great planet Virgilius to these people who knew more about the star than he did. I grew irritable, bored, and wrathily wondered if he, too, had arranged that we be taken somewhere on the morrow. Covertly I watched my inamorata, passive, calm of face, taller, darker, more beautiful than any woman in Centauri. Dare I approach such chilling loftiness? Yes; and subdue, overpower with the potency of my own passion.

Alpha Centauri shall be mine! We were born for each other—just a sweet woman of this earth, nothing more; else could she create desire? Boldly I forced my way to her side, determined to sweep away the tantalizing indifference. I would command her thoughts, then— Ah, how irrational are dreams! Before her calm, expressionless regard my passion quelled. She was kind; yes, a dead kindness, as with a few words and slight inclination this regal woman passed from the hall. I hastened after her; she lingered reluctantly beneath the lofty arch. "Rest well, Virgilius," she murmured sweetly; "in a few hours we meet again."

I bent deeply before her, but glanced up quickly at the sound of a low laugh—she was gone.

Her departure signaled the end of festivities, and after many salutations and best wishes we four found ourselves alone in the vast hall, staring vaguely at each other. The lights grew dim, casting ghostly reflections in the mirrored spaciousness, and chilled with the deathly silence pervading this marvelous crystal palace we hurried to our apart-

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ments, where several very sleepy individuals awaited us, whom we promptly dismissed.

"To-morrow we go through the museum," Saxe informed us.

"Yes, and take in the city," echoed Sheldon.

"And in the evening," cried Saunders excitedly, "we visit the Observatory, situated upon a mountain somewhere. My acceptance is for all of us. I fancy this engagement the most important."

"Are you at leisure to accompany us, Sally?" asked Sheldon insinuatingly; "or do instructions begin at once? No occasion to stare," he replied to my look; "you have not been secretive. The women over here are all alike. When time hangs heavy and my mind unoccupied, I am to teach a couple of sweet morsels the art of love also, which, it seems, only the ancients knew anything about. Innocence, however, is a thorough accomplishment in this wonderful land of advancement. It will take centuries of progression before the charm of this trait is valued by the women of our world. Knowledge is the admitted great passion over here, the foundation of existence, etc., and sought from cradle to grave, even then not abandoned; hence, the Centauri brain is ever active, verdant, and dogged ennui as Love is a dead evil. Here a man is judged by deeds and what he knows, not by what he's worth. Wealth, the common, is thought of with indifference, poverty has become obsolete. You see I did not waste my time this evening and, Sally, you have a powerful rival. You will lose,

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of course; that's what you came over here for, to experience a losing game, never having done so before. But look sharp, ice-crusted volcanoes are risky toys. Notice anything peculiar about the remarkable Alpha? Certainly not; you are too much in love," he added hastily, not giving me time to reply. "She is different from all the women of this land. The first Centauri was an off-shoot of the Potolili or Octrogonal tribes—mark that! She has colored blood. I suspected it when I saw the old boy; but one glance at your divinity and all doubts vanished."

"She is the most beautiful woman in the world!" I cried hotly.

"She is ravishingly beautiful," he replied; "but no white woman looks quite as she does. She is superb, but—. Take care, Sally, should you tire, as you are apt to—all men do—Centauri would be a dangerous place for us."

He stretched and yawned, while I, too full of emotion to retort, glared scornfully. He laughed good-humoredly as I hastened to my apartment.

## CHAPTER XII.

The following day dawned clear, bright and hot. The heat irritated Sheldon and inspired orative propensities in Saxe.; both were engaged in argument as I entered the room reserved for—er—gossip.

"They are certainly a cold-blooded, soulless race," agreed Saxe. to Sheldon's testy exclamation: "Fish!"

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"The result of over-civilization," continued Saxe. with merciless deliberation. "They have reached the acme of that which we deem impossible, yet gaze upon in all its remarkable rarity—Perfection. And in the whole universe I see nothing so imperfect; yet these people are sublimely satisfied with themselves, their complacency and faith in their superiority is superb—I wouldn't be one of them! In their marvelous conceit they have dared penetrate and would crush Nature's final repose. Their indefatigable search for knowledge is spurred by the belief that everlasting existence is accomplished in conquering all mysteries. Death to them is full realization, having solved the problem of joy they forfeited immortality. Earth is their Paradise; they and their world beyond have reached perfection —there is nothing beyond."

I hastened to change the subject. Saxe.'s words filled me with horror as I thought of the beautiful girl whose supreme ambition was for immortality, which she expected to gain through deeds, not death. Knowledge would be the ruination of this grand race. Saxe. spoke the truth, but I would not believe, and accused him of hasty judgment and ever on the alert for effect. He shook his head, gravely reiterating his statements of the "strange, repellant Centaurians," from whom he would learn all he could, considering them, from a scientific point of view, most interesting. He emphatically preferred the Potolilis and Octrogonas.

I hurried to the gardens to avoid further discussions, but my friends soon joined me. We strolled

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beneath gigantic trees, enjoying their cool, quiet protection from the fierce sunlight. Strange flowers grew in profusion, flowers of massive beauty and sickening-sweet fragrance.

“Monstrosities—flowers—Centaurians!” snapped Saxe., still harping on the subject that made me realize the full meaning of despair.

I passionately loved the beautiful Centaurian who ruled over this abnormal civilization, whose demise meant—bah! does Saxe. know any more about it than the rest of us? Impatiently I turned away, colliding with a huge bush glorious in bloom, whose exquisite flower of transparent whiteness petaled a star-shaped, golden heart. Instantly the beautiful, heavy, fragrant clusters enslaved the senses with a strange, ecstatic glamour. The compelling personality of the siren I worshipped roused vivid, overpoweringly, crowding from my mind all obnoxious warnings. Impulsively I plucked the gorgeous witch flowers, and with fervent message sent them to the fairest, most beautiful woman in all the world. The reply was brief, characteristic, despairing. Alpha Centauri was thankful I had rested well (which I hadn’t mentioned), and trusted I would find the day full of enjoyment. She would receive me when I returned from the Observatory.

“Damn the Observatory!” I blurted out.

“Another man, no fake!” chirped Sheldon in his usual consoling manner. “A fine girl like that, of course, has admirers.”

“I don’t believe it!” I bawled.

“Centur is not interested in your beliefs,” he re-

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torted ; "and—oh, well, have it any way that's tickling. She's been waiting all her life for—er—you, dear boy."

He snickered, while I, with growing excitement, declared my intention of shirking the Observatory.

"Bravo, Sally! my suggestion exactly," Sheldon laughed. "The Observatory will come later; it always does—just one particular twinkler now; when that pales—."

A number of gentlemen unexpectedly joined us. Apparently they had been waiting for us somewhere and I was cheated out of my reply.

Sheldon fairly shook with exasperating enjoyment as he manœuvred to prevent me getting any closer to him than a block.

We were escorted to the museum, our way leading mostly through the vast gardens of the palace. From time to time along the route groups of gentlemen casually joined us until, as Sheldon elegantly expressed it, we ought to be tagged or the Pound might take us for the lost tribe of Roman-Jews and get rude.

We strolled along in pairs and groups. I was tolled off to a set of pretty, babbling inconsequents, whose beauty, gracefulness and astonishing interest displayed in Sheldon's witticisms impressed me rather favorably. I amused myself watching Saxe. as he cleverly juggled with the people he thought so little of, making them his friends; but finally bored into deep meditation completely forgot them all, even the beardless fashionables, whom the Centaurians considered my class, who, uneasy, at my ab-

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sent-mindedness, uncongeniality, slyly slipped away one by one. Unnoticed I escaped down a side path, where a sea of pink bloom tempted me to wander in amazed admiration through a veritable forest of waxen lilies. But their roseate beauty, fragrance failed to lighten the gloom that now gripped desperately. For the first time in my life I realized my own individual worth. Stripped of wealth, the ruling deity of my world, I stood revealed an ordinaire without talent or inspiration, a dissatisfied nondescript riling at fate, limited in the higher treasures of enlightenment before which this fair, radiant land of mighty ideals kneeled. Saxe., Sheldon, Saunders and myself, had battled with northern horrors to discover—same evil old world of sordidness, shoddily veneered, ranting victory over impulse, but coveting, struggling, for the imaginary power of knowing all things.

I had neglected to bring my one potent charm, and out of my sphere, bitter with disappointment, crazed with love sickness, in a frenzy of desire I vowed—vowed to possess the One Woman, who from her pedestal of aloofness roused such reverential awe. She who would solve all mysteries shall realize the joy, sorrow of savagery.

Before the masterful emotion of possession, tumultuous ravings evaporated. My mind cleared, freshened as a mid-summer's day after a cooling shower, and from a sweet, calm reverie, I was suddenly roused by my own ringing laughter. After all, these marvelously enlightened people were not

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so different from us—the whole world avoids a man in love.

I emerged from the forest of blush lilies; a wide waste of velvety lawn stretched far to the east, and nestling in a hollow of soft emerald, a long grotesque structure of ivory whiteness gleamed. It was the museum. The entrance stood wide and I entered a lofty, tiled hall, the walls wondrously carved; fabulous monstrosities leered from all sides. I stepped into a spacious room hung with hand-woven silks and rare tapestries of intricate design, rich scarfs of delicate raised beading represented scenes of a strange, unknown period. There were peculiar wall ornaments in circular and diamond shapes. Queer conical baskets, varying in size from a thimble to a trunk woven from human hair, the various shades blending exquisitely in quaint patterns. There were curious pouches, chatelaines and many dainty toilet articles, made from the damask leather of pulped flowers, the odor after unknown centuries clinging pungently to the crushed blossoms.

I strolled from one department to the other crowded with priceless curios. It was impossible to view everything in a single day, but I did good work in the few hours I spent there, and during my stay in Centur visited the museum many times.

Most of the morning glided away as I lingered before great jewel cases, containing superb gems. I marveled at the rare, beautiful settings, and queer golden ornaments covered with weird inscriptions; great golden urns, shaped like a bishop's mitre, and

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tongueless bells engraved with heathenish figures, and apart by itself was an enormous block of gold cut with minute carvings and hierographic writings, with a monstrous ruby like a rose-bud sunk in the center. The tiny carvings represented vital epochs in the history of Centauri, and the great ruby heart would evaporate when Centauri ceased—the sentiment was very pretty.

I curiously examined numerous trays of beads, their glaring colors blended gorgeously in barbaric settings. These articles were treasured because worn by the first Centauris, and for centuries had ceased to be manufactured. The few remaining strings in Saxe's collection were vastly superior in make and no doubt, in many eloquent speeches, he would be requested to donate them to the museum.

I wandered into a great long picture gallery. The walls hung with rare old paintings—these people had their "old masters" also. For over an hour I remained before a huge painting; it seemed one could enter the pictured room and converse with the vividly animated faces, brightened with such friendly, expressive eyes. In the foreground the figure of a woman reclined upon a golden couch swathed in flimsy material, ill concealing her dusky beauty. Deep, burning eyes gleamed intensely, heavy masses of dark hair fell all around her. She was beautiful, fascinating, yet repelled. The passionate eyes were cruel, the lovely mouth drooped, cold, cynical; yet there was a startling resemblance between this divinity of past ages and the woman I adored. The ancient Queen was feline,

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treacherous, and the living beauty——? I was informed the portrait was a splendid likeness of the first woman to rule the Centaurians. Her reign had been one of culture and prosperity. She existed during the era of Love, and was Alpha the First. All the women of the Great Family have been named after her. "There is a wonderful resemblance between the portrait and the present Alpha," I remarked.

My informant lowered his eyes. The glamour of awe, reverence, had been well ground into these people. Apparently the present Alpha was sacred and beyond comparison. The political situation of this great country could be regarded any way it pleased the Centaurians, but their Alpha was their Queen.

The worshipful gentleman spoke, his voice trembling with pride. "The present Alpha is divine," he told me.

I saluted.

"And," he continued, "the painting that so interests you represents the Centaurians just emerging from the savage state."

"Ah, bravo!" We bowed deeply to each other and, admiringly. I watched him as he strolled leisurely away.

For some time I lingered, studying the untamed beauty of Alpha the First, then as the echo of voices reached me, and fearing to encounter those who had failed to notice my absence, I hurried ahead through luxurious apartments furnished in the silken modernness of my world and rested se-

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cure in a dimly-lit room crowded with primitive earthenware, grotesque pottery and cooking utensils. Progression had neatly divided the apartment. Near where I stood were shelves of ancient bric-a-brac and clay crockery of unique design and molding. There were tall, shining pedestals and enormous fat vases, and behind a hideous idol with white eyes, I hid till sure those I wished to avoid had passed on.

I wandered aimlessly, marveling at the fabulous antiquity, and finally anchored in a vast department of massive machinery. Here progression had made rapid strides; you could follow it from the crude, primitive, to perfected mechanism. I came across a curiously devised instrument, raw, immature, yet very similar to Saxe's lost *Propellier*. His invention, however, was the idea perfected, and to excite comparison and prove the superiority of his own instrument he intended constructing a new machine and present it to the museum.

I examined strange traveling conveyances, uncouth, chariot-shaped, and laughed at the repetition of custom—chariots were in use at the present time. There were huge ocean liners, and bulky, high-masted sailing vessels, and ominous, sullen battleships. The railroad was ludicrously represented, in complete trains of heavy, lumbersome coaches, drawn by gigantic engines, as different from the locomotives of our world as the two halves of the globe. The first aerial machine, though a complete failure, had its niche in this colossal exposition. Tragic was its history, a score or more lives sacri-

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ficed to the inventor's ambition. Navigable balloons came later, marking progress, success, in various forms. Most were square at the base with toy wind-mills for propellers, and if they sailed the air, all right; but not even Centauri could tempt me to enter one. Devilish implements of war and monstrous instruments of torture occupied a vast space, catalogued according to history with civilization glaringly noticeable in the learning of refined fiendishness. It was fascinating to follow up the perpetual advancement of inhumanity. From primitive ingenuity of the antediluvian age one stepped through the periods of enlightenment, reaching the zenith of hostile progression through an awful device, creating instantaneous blindness. This exhausted the age of war, but the exquisite cruelty of these people continued to advance. Instruments of frightful torture were extensively arrayed, foul infernal machines to whose ingenious devilishness nothing, nothing in the universe could compare—the Centaurians have not always been saints (?).

Constant civilization simplifies the miraculous, but savagery exists as long as life's fluid stains red.

I lost no time in getting away from the room of horrors with its loathsome exhibit of man's satanic genius, and hastened down a narrow, serpentine passage, plunging unexpectedly through a swinging brass net door. A flood of light greeted me and I blinked and gaped in confusion. I had stumbled into the midst of a large assemblage of gigantic men and women whose stone countenances welcomed me

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with every variety of expression. There were joyful, beaming smiles, and fierce glances of forbiddance, but all diffidence vanished before the sweet witchery of invitation. I had reached the hall of wonderful sculpture and at once sought the three famous loves of Centauri.

Perfection in art had been attained during the era of passion; plainly genius is a savage taint. The deadening of all emotion is productive of the marvelous in science, but abnormality is the result of too advanced civilization. In this motley collection acquired and natural inspiration is easily discernible and progression traceable in gradual sections. The Centaurians had reached the inartistic height and realized it. They treasured antiquity above all the miraculous inventions of modern times.

Conspicuously set apart and above in lofty azure niches, the three grand passions of the dark ages gazed down upon their stone dominion. I paused before a colossal figure in quartz richly veined with gold, a form of heavy, generous proportions, a dull, stupid face—this was Love. The sculptor was a master, but lacked originality, expression, and judging him by his work, he'd found Love deucedly slow. His winged child, however, was exquisite, but failed to impress, being the same fat, little boy trying to fly that we're all familiar with.

The third Love was produced in a later generation and tantalized with enticement. The artist betrayed a cynical, humorous genius in every curve of his exquisite creation and had transformed a huge block of virgin marble into a pair of lovers. It

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was the work of a visionary, the human form never reached such absolute divinity.

A feminine figure of petite, delicate loveliness was passionately clasped in the massive arms of a herculean Adonis, who gazed rapturously into the upturned flower face, fascinating in winsome, diabler beauty. The pose was ideal. This risque conception was "Fancy," and I laughed softly as I figured out the situation. Each fancied, desired, toyed with the other, both were superficial; and the sculptor, after varied experience, happily discovered that Love was merely a fleeting disturbance. Vaguely I wondered if anything so incredulous could be true, and devoutly hoped so. Centaur I loved, fiercely desired, but should the end be disastrous I would give all my wealth to have the madness flit airily away into convenient, mischievous "Fancy." Not caring to mar the delightful, whimsical impression this astounding phantasy made upon me, I left the museum.

The morning was far advanced—noon, I judged by the sun. There wasn't a soul in sight, just a broad expanse of calm and peace throbbing beneath a scorching sun, and my enchanting forest of vermillion flickered, sultry, seemingly hundreds of miles away. I decided to go to the city. It was a long tramp, but I rested frequently in cool green parks, shaded by giant trees. Houses at first were few, quaintly picturesque, surrounded with beautiful gardens and orchards. Soon this lovely rural simplicity gave way to broad avenues lined with costly residences, but after awhile, though the uniformed ele-

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gance was very impressive, I wearied of the monotonous similarity of the odd domed buildings, glistening with a greenish lustre. It was this sea lustre which caused Sheldon to exclaim, when beholding the palace of Centauri, "A palace of crystal!"

Houses were not crushed together as seen in our cities. Each building was centered in a spacious square and all surrounded with high, solid walls. Curious, I examined this wall. The surface was smooth, shiny and cold. I decided the foundation was of stone veneered with a combination of—er—

A short distance ahead a gentleman stepped from one of the gardens and I hastened to join him. He had no objection to my company; the Centaurians are a genial, social race. It was not long, however, before he discovered I was "one of the four strangers who had crossed," etc., and he hung like a burr. He was full of information, tedious with lengthy explanations—he went clear around the city to reach a point just across the street, and I watched for a chance to lose him, deciding finally to excuse myself and streak up another avenue, when suddenly he grasped my arm, murmuring: "The hour of worship," and rushed me ahead to avoid the people trooping from houses and gardens who swelled the great throng that gradually swooped upon us. In the crush I lost my friend, but could see him peering for me in all directions and cheerfully eluded him. I was forced along, wondering at the destination of this dense, silent throng, all so

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hurried and earnest, traveling with settled purpose in one direction. Women, vividly beautiful with health; men, muscular, powerful in their strength; children, fresh with a cherubic loveliness; a fascinating crowd. Suddenly loud shouts of warning rang clear on the sultry air, I heard the clattering of horses' hoofs upon the hard pavement: the crowd parted with shrill cheers and a chariot drawn by plunging white horses flew by. A woman stood erect, holding with one hand the reins guiding the flying steeds, the other was pointed to the heavens. A woman tall, straight, a goddess with dark tresses floating in the breeze.

"Alpha Centauri!" I gasped.

"Aye, Alpha Centauri," the man next to me answered.

"Priestess of the Sun!" cried a second.

"The bride of Knowledge, whose wedding gift was divinity," murmured a third. And it is all very pretty, I thought, and what a poetical, sentimental race these people are.

Steadily pressing onward, with constant reinforcements trooping from every avenue, the crush became alarming, but finally we entered a wide park and in relief the people spread like a great, black wave over the green lawn thinning to an obelisk peak toward a shining temple, with glistening steeples topped with huge golden globes. The bronze portals stood wide and, carried along by the rush of devout Centaurians, I entered a place dark with the chill of a sepulchre. My eyes accustomed to the brilliant sunlight at first could distinguish

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nothing, but gradually the darkness lifted. I was in a house of worship crowded with a kneeling, reverent congregation. Ignorant of what they worshipped, I would not kneel, but squatted upon the cold, tiled floor, and peered through the dim light. A long hall, wide, windowless, with lofty domed ceiling and rounded walls hung with rich tapestries and exquisite wood etchings. In the roof was a circular opening about twenty feet in diameter—this admitted all the light and ventilation. No wonder the place was cold, dark and filled with close vapors. Directly beneath this opening four massive, yet transparent, columns rose, and in the center a figure stood heavily draped, with face upturned and arms hanging limply at the sides. In the dimness at first I took this form for a fifth column. The congregation was a silent one, no psalm singing, minister or priest; yet all were reverently, devoutly engrossed. Gradually the light grew brighter, clearer, and long, slanting rays of the sun filtered through the opening. Longer, stronger, grew these slants of light and heat penetrating the darkest corner. Then suddenly the sun itself appeared, a round, burning disc, high in the heavens directly above the opening. The Temple was flooded with light, and the figure I took for a statue moved, flinging up its arms in worshipful adoration, chanting weirdly in low tones. As the sun moved so did the form. I caught a glimpse of the face and fell against my neighbor with a loud, startled cry, but my voice was drowned in the great volume of music that filled the place. These people with lifted faces

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and outstretched arms sang ardently—sang to the Sun. And the woman upon whom I feasted my eyes stood in all her marvelous loveliness amid the burning rays of this fiery god, in truth a Priestess of the Sun.

As the sun gradually sailed over the opening the rays became shorter, more oblique, casting odd black shadows, and finally the Temple was once more in darkness. The song ended abruptly, the congregation rose and quietly dispersed; services were over.

I remained, intending to examine this peculiar Temple of a fiery religion, but the lid slid suddenly over the opening above and hastily I groped my way to the door, thankful there were no seats to stumble over. Out in the hot sunshine again I mingled with the crowd that hurried in various directions and wandered about the city for hours.

The architecture of public buildings was varied, unique, superb, and in complete contrast to the monotonous sameness of private dwellings. Skilled architects had planned that no two government buildings should in any way be similar. Near the palace was the court house, a low, square, rugged stone building of primitive hideousness, centuries—centuries old. Prisons there were none; this half of the globe was free of criminals. It was explained to me that all causes fostering crime belonged to the middle ages. A philosopher had then predicted that civilization would be complete when passionate humanity became extinct—ahem! The Centaurians had mastered civilization in the produc-

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tion of a perfect race. They could not love or hate. Adultery, murder, envy, jealousy were the unknown evils of savagery.

Exterminating the germ, Love, root of disaster, all other passions were conquered by themselves. Marriage was committed simply for the perpetuity of the race.

I envied these people their lofty, pure minds, and rare, physical perfection. Like blessed, celestial childhood, they seemed free of care. Death brought momentary sadness, regret. These philosophers declared dissolution the highest degree of nature, which they worshipped in the form of the Sun.

The political situation of the country I did not attempt to analyze, but the great organizations of political intrigue, shareholders in the monstrous, outrageous peculation of Principle, and the turbulent, contagious plague of Election, were labeled among the rare curios of the dark ages.

The Centaurians in their far-reaching, penetrating intelligence and advanced simplicity, vested full power in one man, the Great Man of Wisdom.

Centauri was the head of the nation, personifying the government, and enlightened beyond duplicity, believed firmly in himself, as did the people. Fortunates, rising above tortuous, mental doubts, are the dominants of civilization.

From time immemorial each Great Man, upon assuming office, was supposed to form a new government, but the majority abided by the laws of their predecessors, chary of questioning the sublime,

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shackless justice, reigning centuries of calm. Centauri, however, brought about many radical changes. His strenuousness ended the quietude of centuries, destroyed the ancient laws of his ancestors and created new ones. The people welcomed the new regime. "Progression!" they cried, but ignored entirely that which was next to Centauri's heart.

"Progression by degrees is more thorough." The people pleaded and vetoed the order "to abolish all Sun Temples and erect new houses of worship to Him, who is supreme."

Centauri wished to found a new sect and when learning of the veto, sorrowfully remarked: "I have ignored the Gradual, yet will live to realize the suggestion as fact." He sacrificed his wish to the people. He set a new value upon Trade, which in this ideal world defined the full significance of the word—merchandise for merchandise—limiting the circulation of currency to such an extent that in the present era of plenty money was superfluous, and exchanged merely for form in trifling transactions.

Many schools, libraries were stationed throughout the city; handsome buildings luxuriously equipped. Private institutions had long been abolished, young ladies' seminaries and muscle-developing colleges, where fancy sums are expended for a veneer which renders the subject pitifully unfit, lacking even the ability to assist themselves in necessity. Mere useless toys of frivolity issued yearly from stilted preparatories—unseasoned veal

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garnished with underdone dumplings, a saute, to the dismay of our ancestors, is called the rising generation—were forgotten nuisances. In this marvelously enlightened world greed, cupidity were traits of mediæval times, merit rose superior to capricious “influence,” students were ambitious, sincere in their efforts and sought elevation till they passed away to new spheres. Centur had many magnificent theaters, all with a remarkable roof contrivance. At a moment’s notice the whole top of the building could be removed, sliding upon hinges and resting at the side of the house upon props like a huge box cover.

The opera house was by far the handsomest building of its kind in the city. The interior was indescribably beautiful, lavish, rich, wantonly luxurious, with a seating capacity for twenty thousand.

The Centaurians had still to conquer their passion for music, but comedy was the chief amusement, caged in a bijou of art splendid with elaborate decorations of foolish clowns, mirth-inspiring masks and rare, exquisite etchings of fair Folly in various beckoning attitudes. These wise children, with their wonderful clarity of thought, had long digested the happiness of laughter, but realized the absolute necessity of variation. Gloom spiced delight; ennui was strictly a product of my own country.

Tragedy was a classic, a profound culture, and was lodged in a sombre, stately building bearing the nearest approach to a prison I had yet encount-

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ered—a handsome monument to Melancholia, rich in antiquity. There were whole scenes of famous tragedies produced in wonderful paintings startlingly vivid with the misery of reality shadowed in a background of heavy, costly, dull-hued fabrics. I grew wretched with homesickness in the dolorous aura, dense with the miasma of rank perfumes. The theater reminded me of those of my own world during the sad day time, illy ventilated, morose half light, and the usual freezing shower to the imagination which impels you to seek fresh air with alacrity. Tragedy was unpopular with the Centaurians. Thespians were forced to work before the uninspiring view of rows of empty seats, their efforts critically watched by scant audiences, unresponsive, stony, occasionally applauding, invariably at the wrong time. And the actors, adepts in the art of mechanism, waded through their parts with not the slightest conception or sympathy—marionettes.

The culture of progression reduced tragedy to the greatest of farces, and fatalities were shelved by the generation of the wonderful present. The knowledge of the “diseased art, relic of the dark ages,” was culled from the histories of the ancients.

Fascinated, I tramped throughout this marvelous city, congratulating myself that I was without a guide. The lost, strange feeling was delightful. I had not the remotest idea where I was going, but noticed the avenues grew broader, dwellings farther apart and gardens larger, more gorgeous, finally terminating in the city's wall, a shallow

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forest of magnificent trees circling Centur like a great feathery belt; beyond stretched a broad vista of lovely verdant country, but the blue line of distance seemed strangely cut and uneven, a shadowy obstruction reared to a tremendous height extending over the land for miles.

Curious, I wandered to the edge of the forest wall, resting a few minutes, undecided whether to advance or turn back; then I struck out direct over the soft green fields, avoiding the road, which is always the longest route. Why?

The heat was intense, the journey long, tedious, but in the glorious end fatigue was forgotten. I finally reached a high, massive iron trellis wall, through which I peered at a scene; ah! entrancing, Eden-like, veiled with the enchantment of mystery. I found the ponderous gates invitingly wide and dared to enter this strangely still sphere of illusion, dense with overpowering, exotic odors of millions of brilliant-hued blossoms. I gorged my sight with the rainbow tinted vision, then waded neck deep in the wild, flowery maze, wondering for all the heavy-scented fascination just why this paradise had been created.

Gradually my senses pierced the charm and I discovered the bewildering-hued floral abundance was massed cleverly together forming clusters of stars, circles and crescents, separated by broad stone paths, all leading to a gigantic structure rearing higher than any building in Centur. A grim abode, marring, darkening the brilliant surroundings. I ventured near this huge, strange building; high,

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broad, square, of sombre granite, the massive bronze portals stood wide.

A chill quietness pervaded all things, a sudden unaccountable feeling of abhorrence came over me. My swift glance traveled throughout the immense vestibule tiled with black marble and wainscoted to the ceiling with iron; the walls were ornamented with countless little brass knobs.

“A sepulchre!” I gasped; “a monstrous tomb!” and turning quickly fell heavily against a man who evidently had been following me.

“You wish to enter?” he asked, ignoring my awkwardness. In confusion I mumbled an apology. The moment I spoke he saluted deeply.

“One of the four strangers from the other side,” he murmured; and without further ceremony led the way. I followed, plying him with questions, all of which he courteously answered. He informed me the circular spots that so attracted me were the knobs of little doors leading to diminutive, yet far-stretching lanes, containing the ashes of the departed. He twisted a great knob near the floor, instantly twenty or thirty little doors flew open and I peered curiously into the little dark alleys, some extending clear around the building and all containing ashes of those who had departed centuries ago.

“The fundamental law and perfecting touch of nature is extinction,” the gentleman informed me. “At the expiration of a race,” he continued, “the ashes of the entire line are removed from these cells and consigned to the underground vaults

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which form the foundation of this building. Throughout the gardens are many stairways leading to the vaults; ventilation is perfect. Would you care to visit the underground?"

I replied hastily in the negative.

He told me the building had been erected 5,000 years and was still incomplete. It comprised twenty-five floors, with the plans opened to add twenty-five more. But he was positive the additional twenty-five floors would never be built, basing his conviction upon the "supreme law of degeneration, extinction."

He declared the building would never be completed; that it would take thousands of years, and the "inevitable is never idle."

"Has it always been cremation? Was there never a time of burials?" I asked.

"Burials!" he cried: "you mean the body in the natural state, planted in the ground?"

I nodded.

"Preposterous!" he gasped; "is there such a custom? Not even the savages commit such sacrilege. Cremation," he continued, "is a form of our religion, though for a century burials were resorted to. Eight hundred years ago a noted herbalist of that period extracted from minerals an acid which, when applied to the lifeless body, produced instant petrification, but unfortunately the demise of this wise man closed forever the petrified age. We returned to cremation."

He drew from their cells exquisite, odd-shaped urns. Some were of bronze, many of iron, a few

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of gold. The silver ones were tarnished and ugly, and plain stone jars seemed to be the most in use. He drew out boxes of rare scented wood, beautifully inlaid with metals, and from one of the lower shelves brought out a narrow, oblong, silvery block, explaining the style had been in use many centuries and proved the most durable.

Eagerly I examined the curio. It was a crystal block quaintly etched with queer characters, the ashes within giving the silver sheen. I quickly returned it to its cell, then stooping, twisted the great knob near the floor, which caused all the little doors to spring together with a snap. The guide smiled knowingly and, taking my arm, escorted me down the long, sombre hall, advising me to inspect the tomb of the Great Family. We halted in front of a small door, which flew open at the touch, revealing a small, square platform that shot up like a rocket as we stepped upon it. The speed slackened gradually to a standstill before wonderful gates of smooth, dull gold, which slowly opened. I entered a lofty, arched room, flooded with sunlight blazing upon gold-paneled walls, and sank ankle deep in golden floss which deadened sound. I gazed upon fabulous magnificence. There were wonderful embroideries studded with gems flashing golden suns. Silver gauze hung high, shimmering with sparkling sprays, soft as moonlight; strange urns, jars and bowls embedded with gems; delicate jeweled caskets of ivory and jade, tall crystal cylinders, divided into compartments, all containing a silvery dust. Massive bronze col-

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umns carved and engraved with strange forms and inscriptions relative to the history of those whose ashes powdered its heart. Gold and silver globes and queer diamond-shaped receptacles were lined in order upon bronze trestles; all contained the sanctified ashes of rulers long departed, and high above all this splendor hung the golden banner and imperial arms of Centauri.

My eyes suddenly fastened upon a hideous stone figure, the trunk of a woman resting upon a gem-incrusted pedestal.

"That is the form of the beauteous Alpha Centauri, who reigned during the petrified age," the guide informed me. "It is very pathetic, and marks petrification a failure. The lower portion of the body has crumpled away; the pedestal contains the powder. Before long what remains will be dust, then the pedestal will be sealed."

"Why so much splendor for the Great Family if all Centaurians are equal?" I asked.

"All Centaurians are equal," he answered; "but the Great Family is divine, immortal."

"Truly is the Great Family wise," I muttered; then suddenly sickened, repelled at the bestial richness. I turned toward the golden gates, but hesitated, not caring to descend by the treacherous elevator.

The guide, understanding my nervousness, led me through a rear door and out to a long, barren, draughty hall. The floor, a recent addition, was still incomplete, but the ashes of the Great Family always occupied the new portion of the building.

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We reached a narrow, winding stairway, and the friendly guide cautioned and advised slow travel.

I began the steep descent, but frequently rested, owing to an odd trembling, and from that day forever I abhorred the odor of musk and wondered if I had inhaled any of the perfumed powder of the Great Family. Reaching the gloomy, black tiled hall, I rushed like one possessed out into the fresh air, but the beauties of the garden had vanished and I raced along the white paths and was soon streaking it across the green country, nor did I slacken up till reaching once more the swaying, circular forest. I followed the edge of the curving grove, hoping it would lead to the heart of the city, but instead the trees thinned to the harbor. The long, slanting rays of the sun glistened upon white piers and bridges which jutted far out into the bay. Gateways were elaborate columned arches, and the fantastic domed and spiral turreted roofs of dock buildings gave Centur the appearance of a great mystical palace floating upon the sea. If only the much respected municipalities of our various cities could have accompanied me upon that tour of inspection——!! !

Heavy freight was still transported by water and rail. I watched strong, brawny men load and unload queer, barge-like ships.

The wages of labor was paid in bolts of goods, provisions and books. Knowledge was prized higher than gold or silver.

All work was done for the government. There was but one government, one nationality, one lan-

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guage, and competition, monopolies, labor organizations, were unknown evils. There were no classes, all men were equal, but a thin dividing line was stretched by Knowledge—the more learned the more power.

Supreme satisfaction resulted in this superior civilization.

I wandered some time around the business portion of the city, vainly trying to find my way back to the palace. I would not ask directions, as I passed all right for a Centaurian, till I opened my mouth, then I was gaped at as "one of the four," etc. This had begun to pall.

There seemed to be a great many buildings going up in the business district, or it was just possible that my wanderings invariably winded up in front of the same building. At all events my lounging finally attracted the attention of the workmen, and the foreman ventured up and inquired my business. The moment I spoke it was all up—one of the four—. The man saluted deeply and courteously offered to take me over the building. The word flew along the line and I was regarded with interest, and caps were doffed if by chance I happened to meet the eye of any of the men. Information concerning the building was willingly given, and I solved the mysterious appearance of all the houses in Centur—they were made of glass. Great blocks of glass hoisted one upon the other forced and screwed together and joined with liquid crystal. Walls measured from five to seven feet thick; apartments were large, airy, the halls wide, lofty,

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with domed ceilings supported by huge crystal columns. In the center of the dome an electric chandelier swung, which flamed blue the moment the sun set and remained burning till sun rise. Dwellings were constructed to accommodate four and five families. The durability of glass is above argument; most of the buildings in Centur had been standing for centuries, and the palace of Centauri was believed to be the first crystal building erected. Some of the houses had a coating of paint, pale blue, pink, whatever the fancy, creating a porcelain effect which I thought vastly pretty; but the popular tint seemed to be the natural tinge of the glass, a dark, sea green, very cooling to the sight and nerves.

All buildings were hosed every morning, which accounted for their irradiating hues when the sun shone upon them, but at night they presented an extraordinary appearance, the lights within penetrated the glass, which absorbed the rays, and cast a dull roseate splendor. One could walk down rows of glowing houses and yet be in total darkness, but the streets were flooded with brilliancy from great arc lights suspended high above the crossings.

Vacant lots enclosed with unsightly board fences were not permitted to mar the symmetry of this lovely city. Such land was converted into public parks and kept by the city till the owner, ready to build, notified the authorities; then after the time limit the wall which surrounds all private property was erected.

It was very interesting watching the carpenters at

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their strange house building. The preciseness, ease, rapidity and methodical attention given to details produced faultless work. Such conscientiousness was astounding. I remained till the closing hour, then following the directions of the foreman soon found my way to the palace.

The setting sun painted the horizon line a fierce crimson and seemed to sink into the beautiful bay surrounding this most wonderful city. As the fiery glow faded to a dying pink the lights of the city suddenly flared with electric splendor, and calm, reposeful twilight was unknown in this strange land, and night, moist, restful, shaded only the mountains and wilderness.

### CHAPTER XIII.

The palace from foundation to dome was a blaze of lights. As I entered the grounds, Mike (short for Aurelius), who had been detailed to look after the comfort of the "four illustrious," hastened anxiously to meet me. I questioned him concerning Saxe., Sheldon and Saunders. He informed me my absence had greatly alarmed the gentleman with the mane on his chin (Saxe.), but the thin, positive gentleman, with the bald head (Saunders), had advised him that they "couldn't lose the child and he'd turn up as colicky as ever," while the old, young man, with stiff black mustachios (Sheldon), had consoled the Kind-hearted One that "the boy could not stray farther than Centur anyhow, and he'd find the palace quick when hungry." This comforted the Good One, with the magnificent

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mane, and early in the afternoon the three, with a large escort, had sailed for the great Ocsta range to view the waters of the Otega. Mike was not certain when they would return, as the Ocsta mountains were far distant. I laughed, knowing full well Sheldon and Saunders had been as uneasy about me as dear old Saxe., and all three had made dead certain of me before sailing to the mountains.

And Sheldon was to view his great body of fresh water at last. His spunk and determination deserves credit. For all the ridicule he stuck to his theory and knew what he was talking about all the time. The great body of fresh water was a fact, and he discovered it.

I hurried to my apartments, thence to the baths. Nothing so refreshing as the bath, yet my long day of wandering and fast made me nearly collapse with fatigue. My feet ached painfully and were badly inflamed; the streets of Centur are hard on pedestrians unaccustomed to sandals. Roads, pavements were of stone, but trees lined the curbing, their wide-spreading branches formed a welcome arch of shade. The sun's rays were more penetrating, more burning on this side of the globe.

Mike served me with a delicious drink and while sipping it I put in the time writing to Alpha Centauri.

It took three notes to gain satisfaction. The first brought no reply, the second an excuse, but the third roused the lady's interest. . . . I was invited to dine.

I sent Mike ahead with acceptance, but stealthily

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followed, and he, all unsuspecting, led me up a long flight of stairs and still another which wound serpent-like around a giant column. I wondered if he would ever reach the top; surely we were climbing to the skies, yet at the end heaven awaited. We finally reached the landing; that is, Mike did. He knocked discreetly upon a little square door which immediately opened and I hurried forward, saluting the loveliest woman in the world.

Of course I was requested to enter and Mike's gasp of amazement dissolved into a very kind, sympathetic smile, while Alpha Centauri laughed outright, the sweetest, merriest laughter imaginable. It set me all aflame. How beautiful she was with that great mass of jetty hair piled upon her head and the heavy-lashed, sidling eyes, evading mine. My pulses throbbed wildly.

The humor of the situation both thoroughly understood and enjoyed, but the impassioned motive was entirely beyond them.

As I entered the room the strong, pungent odor of chemicals warned me I had intruded the sanctified laboratory of Centauri, and to my chagrin, the old gentleman was there, polite, frigid, and deeply engrossed in a table crowded with queer little vials and tubes.

The walls of the room were lined with shelves filled with glass jars containing strange fluids and powders. There were huge glass mortar bowls, tall crystal pipes and cylinders, and several long, narrow tables. Over one a cloth had been hastily thrown.

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"You find me deep in my great work," a sweet voice murmured near me.

I glanced down at the lovely speaker, her arms were bared to the shoulders, and one was stained with a dull red color.

Centauri advised her to cease work and entertain the stranger.

She shrugged her shoulders and turned at once to the covered table and there followed a whispered argument which was perfectly audible to me (one always overhears). He cautioned her against over-confidence, adding that the stranger might lose the desire to teach the science she wished to learn. For several seconds she stood undecided, stubborn, then suddenly courtesied deeply and turned to me. "For once pleasure lures me," she murmured, smiling divinely. "I will be with you in a few moments."

She raised her arm as though to give some last direction to her father, it was the stained arm, but in my ardor I caught and passionately kissed it. The acid was glazed, sticky, the odor sickening. I turned from her, repelled, with a keen desire to get out of the place.

She laughed merrily as she hastened away, and Centauri twitted me that I changed color at the sight of life's fluid, but was able to endure the horrors of the polar regions. He considered that I possessed a remarkable constitution, and informed me his daughter's work was for the prolongation of life.

## The Centaurians

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"She seeks the elixir of eternal youth and health."

I laughed indulgently; a queer whim for such an exquisite creature, but it was distasteful to me to connect this dainty Centaurian with the gross depths of a laboratory, yet it seemed the natural trend of her powerful intellect. She was far and above the ordinary sphere of delicate, ethereal, trifling femininity; a phantom, yes; but tangible, adorable.

Centauri chuckled softly as I laughed again and led me to the covered table. There were a dozen or more silver lidded bowls arranged in a circle with a wide, flat dish in the center. Curiously I raised the lids, all contained liquids of various hues; one was green with a spicy odor of herbs, another thick, white as milk; and a third clear as water, while the flat center dish contained a dull, brownish fluid, emitting a strong wild odor.

"Blood!" I whispered.

"Quite right," Centauri replied comfortably; "blood of oxen, which must be used in the natural heat."

He turned to a tall glass jar which was filled with a beautiful ruby fluid, and placing a small vial to the crystal tube, pressed the siphon. The fluid rose sluggishly to the surface, then slowly flowed into the vial, thick, like syrup of fruit. He filled two goblets, handing one to me, the other the old gentleman drained at a gulp, never batting an eye. The draught turned against me, but I swallowed it. The liquor had a sweet, poignant flavor, and a

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most injurious effect. I felt a terrible pain in the region of my heart and the blood rushed to my head, blinding me. Centauri led me to the adjoining room, large, airy and flooded with moonlight. The weakness quickly passed, taking with it the fatigue of the day. I felt freshened, invigorated, as though just risen from a long, restful slumber. I hurried to the wide-opened windows, inhaling the fresh, fragrant breeze whistling around the high-turreted room and gazed upon a marvelous night view. The fantastic city of Centur flared a brilliant panorama, the penetrating light of electricity streamed from countless gigantic bulbs softening the lurid glow of domed buildings; and darting aimlessly, high in the heavens, uncanny bright red globes floated. It was a fabulous scene, yet a light touch upon my arm, a dark, fascinating face smiling into mine, and I completely forgot the blinding, weird expanse. As I drew her to me the room instantly blazed with light. A table lay spread with snowy cloth decked with sparkling silver and crystal. Dainty, tempting viands were served to me by the superb Alpha, but though I had fasted the whole day, I ate with little relish, while a parched throat forced me to drink more than was prudent. Under the fiery stimulant my mind expanded with brilliant thoughts, which I voiced with a sudden new eloquence that amazed me. I told of my side of the globe, picturing the great cities so vividly my listeners leaned eagerly toward me as though seeing my descriptions. I dwelled upon the religion of my country, explaining there were hundreds of sects, yet all worshipped

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the One Supreme Being, God, Father of all nature. Alpha gazed at me with distended, wondering eyes, while Centauri sprang to his feet and with outstretched arms spoke wildly, agitatedly. I could not follow clearly his ravings, but his meaning was unmistakable, and while he spoke his daughter's eyes narrowed, the forehead flattened, and the perfect brows met in a straight line.

Centauri's excitement was painful; he was a fanatic. He believed in the Almighty, and denounced the Sun-worshippers as heathens.

Unmindful of his daughter's presence he told me it was she who ruled the people; their idol, leader, they followed with blind devotion, and it was a divine providence that led me safely across the terrible North, that I might fulfill the mission ordained at my birth—converting and saving the Centaurians, through the powerful love inspired by the Priestess of the Sun.

“Teach my daughter the love of God!” he cried. “It will bring sublime, everlasting happiness to the Centaurians.”

The Priestess of the Sun patted his hand indulgently, laughing softly, yet defiantly. His voice quavered inaudibly, with arms raised in protest he sank to his seat. She rose, glanced deferentially at her father, then her voice rang sweet, clear as a bell in defence of her creed. She was bigoted, but unlike Centauri (who undoubtedly was the most sincere), she was cold, collected, more eloquent and convincing, and wisely refrained from denunciation.

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"Each to his belief," she told me, "and my reverend father is the great Centauri." With a radiant smile she courtesied deeply to him. "His words are indisputable facts," she continued; "facts of long ages ago when the land of Centauri was a great, seething hive, choked with millions of fanatical sects. Discontent, Envy, Malice, Unhappiness twined the pedestal of Love. Evil passions predominated, ruled. Wickedness festered and festered into a poisonous, contagious eruption, which overspread the land and the greatest and last war of Centauri was fought. Years, many years, the god of Destruction swayed his rod of devastation, the knell of Centauri tolled with mighty vibrations, startling, waking somnolent civilization which gathered its dormant forces for one last tremendous upheaval and burst the reservoirs of Purity, flooding the country with righteousness, peace; and from the divine calm that followed rose the great golden Vespa of the Sun. Germs of progress spread broadcast. Passion first was controlled, deadened, then obliterated. The Sun is the inspiration of the universe, but we worship the mysterious, powerful Spirit, who controls the great globe of beneficial light and warmth. Centauri, profound in wisdom, does not fail, but refuses, to comprehend the depth of our creed. The Centaurians are too deeply rooted in their religious sentiments to permit a sudden caprice to dictate a turning in their cherished sacred convictions. For centuries their religion has been as the air they breathe, life. We are fire-

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worshippers, and the emblem of our faith burns in the heavens for all eternity."

She had forgotten us. Standing erect, magnificent in her enthusiasm with face and arms uplifted, a goddess above the gods; she was superb in her fanaticism. I glanced at Centauri; he sat with crossed arms and bowed head, moody, silent. A long, quivering sigh and Alpha realized the present. She glanced defiantly at her father, yet her face retained its beauteous, angelic expression. She smiled divinely upon me and told me the night was still young, that my friends had not returned from the Ocstas, and she would know more of my wonderful country.

She leaned dangerously near me. Her face flushed and her eyes gleamed as she passed her hand over my brow. I raised my arms to clasp her, but she darted away; with a cry of adoration I sprang up and dared to follow, but she was gone; and Centauri's cold words chilled my passion as he bade me be seated. In the moment he was the mechanical Centauri, courteous, deliberate, freezingly distant.

"The love that creates desire is beyond the Centaurians," he told me. "Progression erased the bestial. The fiery red of the savage still tinges your blood, and my learned daughter is as far above and beyond you as the Sun, that inspires her ravings. Give up this consuming desire—which breeds disappointment, turning bitter the sweetness of your nature. In very sympathy I would spare you, my

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son. The tribulations of desire, I do not understand; but disappointment, ah! that curse blighting the nobleness of humanity, I have known. Rise above lusty thoughts, seek a higher, purer aim; teach my daughter to know and love the Supreme Being, the Creator, and Virgilius, 'The Virgilius,' becomes immortal."

I reverently saluted the religious fervor of this great man and, much affected, earnestly assured him of my good intentions.

He came quickly to my side and in benediction laid his hands upon my head. I promised to do all that he wished, but added that his daughter must and would be mine, and that I would always adore her, even though I knew the end would be hell.

"You will help each other," he murmured; "but you are not mates. I have spoken. May the Lord bless and spare you."

He returned to his seat as Alpha entered, carrying a dainty golden salver laden with tiny crystal goblets through which sparkled the rose-tinted syrup of life. She offered us the liqueur, then with her glass held high, bade us drink to perpetual youth and health.

I drained my glass, this time feeling no ill effect from the liquor, though it flushed and gave me boldness. Making no attempt to conceal my ardor, I led this lovely woman, who so inflamed me, to a seat near the window, and in impassioned tones, as though it were the first time, told her of my love. Suddenly, daringly, I drew her closer to me,

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forgetting Centauri entirely, but when I recovered sufficiently to look around for him the glorious Alpha and myself were alone.

She gently released herself, gazing at me with unresponsive, wonder-wide eyes.

"Is this love?" she asked, "and are you happy?"

"To love you is ecstasy!" I replied. "To possess you—heaven!"

"You are profane," she murmured reprovingly. "Woman is mortal. It is sacrilegious comparing her with paradise."

Powers above! my passion suddenly evaporated; but though she chilled me it was still rapture to be near her.

"I am trying to teach you the lesson of love, sweet Alpha," I whispered; "you must learn, you promised."

"You wish to marry me?" she asked.

I raised her hand to my lips and gazed ardently into her deep eyes (same here as on our side).

She moved from me and haughtily inquired if love in my country was not equivalent to marriage.

Rebuked, I humbly answered: "Not always; we marry frequently and for many reasons, least of all for love."

"We marry for companionship, respect," she icily informed me. "Intellect mates with intellect; mental, physical equality, produces the ideal."

"You have betrayed the Centaurians," I cried triumphantly. "Love is not vetoed, but so sifted and refined it bears little resemblance to the divine flame,

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yet the tender passion is not quenched, but the Centaurians unabashed proclaim Love, a dead evil, and boldly title their droll creation . . . Compatibility. Oh, Centauri! Centauri!"

"You dare ridicule!" she cried angrily.

"No, no, my lady!" I hastened to reply. (Good heavens!) "I am giving you the first lesson in the most wonderful of all sciences. Love is a powerful, mysterious, inexplicable ideality—a thrilling experience, and before I leave your world you will have mastered and indulged in all the delights and miseries of this mystic art; and deep in your heart you will bless me for imparting this ecstatic knowledge; and though existence may end in sweet despair (it always does), you have lived and realized. One genuine thrill of this divine folly is worth a life of empty fame with the monstrous finale of decayed immortality. Superb Alpha, your destiny is writ in your glorious beauty and marvelous power to charm."

Her eyes flamed at my words, and for the first time I pondered over the wisdom of my intentions. But desire was turbulent; mad, infatuated, I lost control over conscience, reason—passion has no regrets—I would possess.

I talked with her for hours and told over again of my country and religion, and related completely the life of Christ. She was impressed, awed, and deeply reverenced the divine spirit that embodied the Saviour.

"He was a martyr," she cried with uplifted, wor-

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shipping eyes. "His actions, teachings, were divine inspiration; but—He lived His life too early, and Himself ordained it should be shortened."

Gently I argued, trying to fulfill my promise to Centauri, but I struggled with a superior intellect, and like the brilliant woman she was she listened eagerly, attentively, complimenting me into believing my efforts had convinced her; then, with incomparable tact, she steered from the dangerous subject, and before aware of her intent, I was eloquently discussing the North Pole. Again I lived over that awful voyage, describing the vast dead regions, the insurmountable, smooth, perpendicular cliffs, and terrifying, unfathomable chasms, shadowed in sombre stillness; but when I reached the great, fiery pivot, horror overcame me and vividly I pictured our awful plight as we raced down the swaying mountain with the sea of boiling mass pursuing us and the whole world vibrating like a monstrous pendulum.

"And you dared this peril for science?" she asked.

"My comrades did," I answered quickly. "I searched for the greatest drawback to ambition and life lost value in a consuming desire."

Then I told of the wonderful vision that inspired such intense longings, and that I had worshipped her, months before the expedition.

"I adore you!" I whispered. "It is fate that brought us together—I will have you!"

She laughed softly, studying me through half-closed eyes, then told me from the first I had

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exerted a strange influence, possibly because of the aureola of mystery surrounding me and the great, unknown continent I came from.

“But since our meeting,” she sighed, “new and wonderful thoughts riot in my mind, lulling energy, ambition, and deeply I’ve pondered over the wisdom of a life forfeited for immortality, though it is the grandest finale, and ultimately mine; but I pause, deferring momentous problems absorbed in profound analyses of a powerful, but fleeting emotion.”

“Ah!” I sighed ecstatically.

“Selfishness, Discontent,” she continued, “the premier rules of this great art are mastered in the realization of my own loveliness and the rebellion against fate, injustice of our sacred laws which sacrifices me for the welfare of humanity.”

I stared, astounded, while she, watching me closely with veiled, sidling eyes, caught the wild desire of my glance and, shaking her head, murmured dreamily: “In this wondrous world of fancy crowded with vain longings and godly phantoms which dart from rainbow film, then flash onward, your image does not blend. This sphere is the space of centuries which separates us and, though creating the new element, your appeal fails to inspire response. The joining of two such natures shatters the beautiful—we are not mates. Yours is the love that hopes, dreads, doubts and fears, and dies with possession; while I seek, yet devoutly hope never to find the one only charm of my visionary world—a powerful influence which vanquishes denial, curb-

## The Centaurians

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ing destiny with compelling, flaming radiance—a mighty glory never realized, yet swaying the universe with longings reaching above and far beyond that monster called Death. Ah, Virgilius," she whispered tremulously, "I can love; yes, I can love; but with the knowledge happiness departs forever."

Rapturously I caught her hand, exultant; aflame at her confession I dared press my hot lips to her soft, fair neck. She shuddered, then gently drew from my embrace.

"Thus are the dead evils of the ancients easily acquired," she murmured gloomily, chilling my ardor and thrusting me and my passion to musty remoteness.

"And, Virgilius," she continued, "after centuries of training the savage is still untamed. Leave me now, I am wearied, and the day approaches."

She rose languidly, moving to the window. In the dull gray light of dawn she looked wan, strangely pathetic. In tenderest sympathy I hastened to her side, for the second half regretting my work which had robbed her forever of contentment. The ideal, always existing in her brain, had formed distinct, existable, and she worshipped every caprice of imagination.

Kindly she smiled dismissal, pointing to the heavens flushed with the new day. I understood and, raising her hand to my lips, silently departed. Out of her presence regrets vanished. I had commenced well and accomplished more in a few hours than I had expected to in weeks. Women always adore the ideal, and love a man.

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This strange, fascinating piece of femininity grieved because realizing she was a woman, an adorable woman, not a saint.

Alpha Centauri is mine!

### CHAPTER XIV.

The scorching rays of an afternoon sun roused me from a sleep of hours, yet dreamily I rested till a subdued murmur reached me from the outer room and I knew my friends had returned.

The trio were in deep consultation when I joined them, but all hailed me with evident relief, and Sheldon distinguished himself as usual. He hoped they had not disturbed my "gentle slumbers," as all agreed I needed rest and quiet after the "exhaustive attempt to cipher such a disheartening, complicated, enigmatical, mysterious what?" which made in comparison the most scientific problems diversion. He cautioned me against "invading the climatic disorders of the mighty feminine, as explorers in that realm dazed by rudimental desire, always reached such pitifully befuddled climaxes."

"And, Sally," he continued, "though we have discovered a new portion of the globe, the inhabitants present a very familiar appearance. The feminine species were discovered long ago and are produced in vast numbers on our continent with similar unsatisfactory results; also——"

"I passed the evening with our beautiful hostess," I interrupted, cold, dignified.

"And I missed the preliminaries," he wailed;

## The Centaurians

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"the great act where the intellectual divinity absorbs her—ahem—first experience. But there's time——"

"Now, now, now," interposed Saxe., "let the boy alone; it's his affliction and makes him happy."

"Yes," echoed Saunders, "let him alone, the ailment will cure itself, it always does."

Their winks and ill-concealed, struggling laughter exasperated me and, threatening to be even, I roared that I madly loved the beautiful Centaurian.

"We haven't contradicted you," purred Sheldon soothingly; "but your astonishing frankness relieves much anxiety. We doubted your sentiments toward the very handsome lady—you will survive."

Then they let it out, boisterously, derisively. Vainly I protested; the more I raged the wilder grew their mirth, till suddenly realizing they joshed me, believing raillery a sure cure for the tender malady; also, that each would take turns thrashing any one who dared harass me as they were doing, I dropped chivalry and resignedly joined in the sport. All sobered up instantly and Saxe., understanding (he always did), plunged into an account of their adventures.

"You should have been with us, Virgilius," he said, looking at me reproachfully. "It was a wonderful voyage. We started shortly after noon, our ship accompanied by a fleet. The strong, fresh breeze of the cloud plains was delightful after the intense heat of the city. We sailed straight north, expecting to reach the Ocstas about sundown, but the committee erred when mapping out the route.

## The Centaurians

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This led over the battle-ground of the Octrogonas and Potolilis, and for three mortal hours we dipped, circled, fluttering like a great buzzard, watching an engagement between the warring tribes. Our captain, a most obliging fellow, slyly detached his ship from the others, which unaware, sailed peacefully on, but our traveling companions when learning the cause of delay immediately secluded themselves. The Centaurians, ahem! are cultured above war—and we had the whole deck to ourselves, occupying railing seats. It was a magnificent sight, Virgillius, magnificent! But warfare is pretty even on both sides of the globe. Here the chiefs, generals, lead in battle; their great armies are drilled to mechanical perfection, in action compact, a gigantic unit; and, boy, every last blessed one of them aimed and shot to kill."

Saxe. wondered how the principals escaped.

"Looks bad for the aiming," murmured Sheldon.

The Octrogonas were the fiercest, but the Potolilis, more numerous, and though the young chief was superb, daring, he was gradually forced to retreat, which so enraged his army, discipline was trampled under. They rushed the enemy and both sides fought like beasts.

"It was slaughter, horrible, yet differs not at all from what is going on continually in some portion of our world," Saxe. growled. He scored those "high-sniffing Centaurians," for their "dastardly indifference," and declared the extermination of the magnificent savage a crime.

"For they're killing each other off as fast as

## The Centaurians

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they can and the whole row over a couple of women!"

Saxe.'s indignation gradually calmed in the soothing enthusiasm of explaining how he'd manage affairs were he the head of the nation, but when Sheldon and Saunders started in with a few suggestions his interest suddenly flagged and he decided the people over here knew pretty well what they were about, though things did not seem quite straight to him. Still the deep, far-sighted Centaurians were undoubtedly correct in their "aloofness," and the war was no concern of ours anyhow. He didn't believe the colored races would ever become civilized anyway, but Potolili was the shrewdest egotist he'd ever met, and Octroonga, the noblest ass.

"And," continued Saxe., "over civilized and savage alike glows the one great flaming religion; all worship the powerful, fiery God, and hostilities ceased the instant the sun went down. When we finally reached the Ocstas, it was glorious moonlight, but a glacial atmosphere; we had again invaded the frigid zone."

"The chill in the air was nothing compared to the killing frost nipping our reception," Sheldon blurted out; "our delight in carnage, Sally, me boy, made us lose prestige with the Centaurians."

"Yes, but a biting, raw indifference, produced a tremendous thaw," Saxe. hastened to add; "and I, for one, gazing at the weird grandeur of the rugged Ocstas, forgot these people and their advanced, but narrow theories. They seemed petty, inconsequen-

## The Centaurians

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tial, amid the vast wilderness of mighty boulders and unfathomable precipices. You should have been with us, Virgilius, love can be indulged in any moment, but to view the Ocstas at full moon, ah, magnificent! The far-reaching forest of cliffs have a singular, spectral beauty, abundantly covered all the year round with a peculiar, vivid green moss and pale, tender shrubbery. It is spring always in the strange Ocstas; there are no seasons, nothing matures or dies, perpetual spring, with the blasting ice breath of the north settled upon them for all time—something wrong, the Ocstas are unwholesome, and Sheldon intends to explore the whole range! Shouldn't care to get lost up there," he continued, "during my short stay I had the shivers. There is an echo, an uncanny, maddening echo, which moans the length and breadth of the range with every little breeze. It starts with a roar, diminishes to a long-drawn-out, whispering wail, as though something suffered mortal agony—no human brain could stand that any length of time. Then the water! Sheldon's great body of fresh water! It is marvelous; a magnet, an absorbent magnet, from which nothing can stray and which eventually swallows everything.

"Possibly Sheldon's theory concerning this body of water is correct. It looks like a reservoir, the reservoir of the earth, surrounded with a wall of perpendicular, glass cliffs, marred with gigantic fissures and crevices supposed to be the effect of time, ahem! and which Sheldon will explore at low tide. This strange shoreless ocean rouses to fearful

## The Centaurians

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activity during the full of the moon, roaring, booming terrifically, while great mountainous billows dash furiously against the cliffs, boiling, swirling into the great fissures, then receding with a dull, hollow sound, which throws the dreadful haunting echo. The waves form deep whirlpools, then soar upward with such force and volume you think the water will reach the sky, then deluge the earth; yet the glistening, silvery columns never break—it is monstrously impressive.

“I cautiously approached the edge of a crevice and when the water flooded high lowered a goblet. Virgilius, it was the first time I ever tasted water in my life; just what the article is we’re accustomed to . . . Pure, sparkling, icy; I’ve brought a sample of the Otega to show you.” He held a bottle to the light, but it looked so clear I doubted if there was anything in it. The stopper was removed and an attempt made to pour out the liquid. Instantly we buried our noses, and Saxe. hastily flung the bottle out the window. Of all the stenches! The water had been corked for hours and the numerous gases combined in deadly fermentation. Saxe., very serious, gravely, but with the air of expecting dispute, expressed his opinion.

“That water would have exploded had it remained corked much longer,” he remarked, “which proves beyond question the correctness of my statements. It is of volcanic origin and some day there’ll be a terrific eruption, the ocean will vanish with, perhaps, a mountain crowding its cavity; however, I——”

## The Centaurians

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Sheldon, flushed and furious, sprang to his feet, loudly expostulating, but Saxe. was prepared and replied pointedly. From their language I knew it was an old argument and had pretty nearly filled in the time since they viewed the Ocstas; even Saunders took a hand mixing things generally, as he always did, and all three excitedly shouted in chorus, like a trio of women. They made an awful din, but seemed happy, so I let them go it. Now why will people argue? It always creates discord and each, at the end of the mêlée, believes more firmly in his own convictions.

I sprawled contentedly in the broad window-sill flooded with sunlight and drowsed in rapturous dreams, dreams only, but of the most glorious, wondrous creature in the whole wide world.

Heaven is brief, the ardent light gradually slanted chill, and roused by a sudden prolonged silence I found my three friends suspiciously calm, but in a snorting mad condition. It was Saunders who had broken up the seance. He glowered at me and wondered if they were ever going to get anything to eat. These people certainly didn't expect him to keep any further engagements without nourishment. He'd been up all night fooling around that d——d ocean and was exhausted, and he judged it must be near time for him to go somewhere with somebody, too.

Saxe. and Sheldon coughed irritatingly, but further trouble was averted by the entrance of "Mike," who solicitously inquired our wishes about dining. Famished, we all brightened up at the mention of

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dinner. A delicate meal was served, and Sheldon, his mouth full and good humor restored, suggested Mike's health, opining that Aladdin's genii wasn't in it with Mike. We agreed, and in thin glasses of oily greenish liqueur, Mike's health was freely toasted, varied occasionally with a send-off to ourselves and hobbies.

"Yours, Sally," said Sheldon, alluding to the hobbies, "will ripen, mature, fade and decay in the glorious rays of satiety, but when the inevitable mellowness does occur, for Heaven's sake, my dear boy, kill the pest, don't develop into a plague!"

Sheldon actually believed himself witty, original, but remembering he'd been up all night and crabbed I smiled, blandly thanking him for his advice and reminded him that no matter how severe a case I developed it wouldn't be catching. He seemed willing to drop the subject, but Saunders, evidently annoyed at my calmness, testily sputtered:

"Oh, fiddle! Salucci, you waste your time; love is a pastime, an inclination; turn your attention to more profitable pursuits. We will never visit this portion of the world again. Women, love, oh bosh!"

Saunders made me thoroughly angry. I sprang up, bouncing with fury.

"Gently, gently," murmured Saxe., laying a restraining hand upon me. Then as though it were a subject we had been discussing right along, he proceeded to give out his plans for the future.

Sheldon snickered, and Saunders's eyes twinkled,

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though his face retained its long, thoughtful expression.

"A committee representing the government," continued Saxe., placidly, "called upon me, armed with a request several yards long, signed by the most influential citizens of Centur, ahem! including the old boy himself. I was assured that by presenting this country with a duplicate of the lost *Propellier* I would confer a great and lasting benefit to this portion of the world; also it was gently hinted that the accompanying coaches fitted up as we had them would more than . . . etc., etc., etc. But the people feared to impose—and unlimited material would be supplied for construction. A house will be placed at my disposal where I can enjoy the utmost seclusion. I accepted. *Propellier No. 1* was crude, full of defects. The new machine will present startling improvements. Look me up sometimes, Virgilius, don't allow the amorous pursuit to crowd out inventive qualities. And, I say, boys, it seems we're settled in this land of Centauri for a good long time."

"It looks that way," Sheldon agreed; "but we mustn't stay over the limit. I shouldn't relish being marooned in the ice regions."

"We're not beggars for time," I told him. "Allowing twenty months for the return trip, we still have three years to our credit."

Saxe. reminded me that three years passed swiftly; then informed me he understood I was to remain at the palace the honored guest of Love,

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which had made me famous throughout Centauri.

"You're the hero of the band," he bubbled; "these people have forgotten all about the 'grande passion' themselves and naturally believed the universe exempt. They regard you as a TYPE, rare, valuable. The Dailies give amazing suggestions on the subject and gravely advise the organization of a new sect with Love for its theme, and you the standard bearer; ahem! good scheme. Read any of the papers yet?"

"Nope!" I answered sullenly.

"Very diverting," he informed me, "highly anarchistic in tone, but devoid of the feverish sensationalism affected by so many journals of our world. The news of Centur is printed exquisitely clear upon odd parchment-like sheets, the editorials are brief, scintillating with wit and powerfully impressive with honesty, sense and simplicity. That sort of thing in our country would dwindle the subscriptions to bankruptcy."

Suspicious, but not certain what Saxe. might be driving at and as I never sassed the gentleman, I cautiously promised to look over the journals he mentioned. Then, curious how the Centaurians had disposed of Sheldon, I asked him about his plans.

"Oh, I'll spend most of the time in the Ocstas," he told me. "I am forced to prove my theories, which have roused universal discussion. Two societies with conflicting views will occupy caves in the close vicinity of Yours Truly, just to watch the 'wonderful operations.' Quartered with me will be a crew of doubters, delegates from various

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Geographical-Geological societies, who pretend to be assistants. The Ocstas abound in mysteries, caves are innumerable, some tunneling far into the mountains honeycombed with apartments. At one time, I understand, these mountains were level country, and the caves are ruins heaved up by some—er—awful eruption. Ahem! The Centaurians are remarkable people, but move slowly. Give us six centuries the start and we'd have traced that body of water to the heart of the earth. Of course, I'm considered a crank, a huge joke, but these scientists are the most absurd set I've ever run across. One eloquent individual broadly hinted that a mania controlled me and thought it extremely fortunate my attention was attracted to the Otega oceanlet, instead of to the boiling sea at the pivot. But I'm a brave gentleman, you know, the guest of Centauri, and at liberty to remove the Ocstas if disposed. He did not doubt should a Centaurian, alive with a watery hobby, stray to our side of the globe, reciprocal courtesies would be extended and an ocean or two thrown in. Now, what d'ye think of that?

"I laughed—everybody did—and shouted for a reply. I told them every argument indulged marked one year less of life, and that I would easily prove all my assertions. And, Sally, I'll remain in those damned mountains till I prove one of two theories —Saxe.'s or mine. I'll discover the source of that ocean and trace the great arteries which extend over the globe, or it'll turn out a freak of nature, phenomenon, the aftermath of something terrible.

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Saxe.'s theory is very plausible, to some it would be the solution, but plausible theories are not always correct ones. I'll look for you often, Sally, a change, you know, is a wonderful restorative."

"Oh, I'll run over occasionally," I promised. "I believe in restoratives, but it doesn't always require a change."

"Bravo! bravo!" he shouted, twirling his glass. "Luck to Sally, and his—er—dangerous enterprise!"

Blushingly, I drank deeply.

"Better accompany Sheldon when he starts for the mountains," Saunders advised. "The polar scenery is no comparison to the fabulous Ocstas, and that freak ocean is the strangest, most unnatural sight man ever looked upon. I'll never go up there again," he added, "unless with approaching dissolution I should meander. Spirits always hover over the places that haunt them, theosophists whine. However, I'll need relaxation, and it's my intention to explore every portion of this continent before returning to my own. Probably I'll even join the expedition to the moon. This afternoon I go to the Observatory to remain indefinitely," he continued, "but lacking Sheldon's penetration, I still have to discover how I stand with my fellow scientists—we've already argued. They've been gaping at the pale planet for centuries, producing some marvelous maps and photographs, but are still in doubts about it. Opinions are varied, wondrous. Some believe it an old moon vanishing; others, that it's the young

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blaze of a new sun, and I'm the only one positive. This pink phosphorescence (Saunders assumed his lecture pose) is a new world forming, a twin world to Earth, speeding, crashing through space with mighty velocity, erratically circling this globe in continually narrowing rings to sure disaster. The stellar twins cannot escape collision, then—either we absorb or it absorbs. The Infinite forms a mighty barrier against which all matter swirls grinding void. Should Earth be the under world it forms the barrier impeding the mad rush of that splendid pale mystery which, as it approaches, absorbs all life, pulverizing this globe. Ahem! we don't need to worry about it, though."

He chuckled comfortably, ignoring Sheldon, who muttered as though much relieved.

"I see great work ahead," he continued happily. "In the science of the stars we're about even with these people of mighty energy and boasted advancement. They follow a most complex system of astronomy, possibly when I've mastered the intricacies I may perceive the wonderful progress claimed; at present I believe my researches the most extended. Now who's going with me to the Observatory? Better all come and take a look around; you can return this evening."

Saxe and Sheldon at once got busy with excuses. Before I could think up anything plausible Mike ushered in several gentlemen whom Saunders greeted effusively. Introductions followed. I was presented as the "gentleman who would accompany the party to the Observatory."

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Glaring at Saunders I bowed acquiescence. His colleagues eyed me curiously and slyly whispered: "The Virgilius."

Saxe, and Sheldon were urged to join the party, but their regrets were positive, and after a lively exchange of compliments we departed.

### CHAPTER XV.

The Observatory, an odd circular building all turrets and balconies, capped the summit of a lofty mountain which rose abruptly out of the lovely bay surrounding the freak city of Centur.

The mystic enchanting quiet of this solitary mountain, with its dense forest of stunted trees and towering fort of science, fired the imagination with unwholesome ambition to accomplish grand impossibilities, and I longed to pierce the unknown and reveal the hidden light that gleams through the day and night. I told Saunders of my singular emotions. He sighed sympathetically and suggested astronomy, that impenetrable science which calms despondency in a profound realization of the sublime vastness of—Nothing.

The marvels revealed through colossal telescopes fascinated me. Viewing countless worlds swirling through space, strange unknown planets bounding from dark obscurity, great globes of vapory fire churning for centuries and centuries belching gigantic flashes, incited me to wild speculation which ended in a positive conviction of the habitation of the moon. This great wan sphere to telescopic

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vision appeared like a far-distant landscape, lofty mountains, wide plains lined with flickering, silvery spaces, were sharply outlined against a vast area of vapory whiteness which alternated dark and light flaring, at intervals, almost transparent. There is atmosphere, life, habitation, upon the moon. The interesting planet was suddenly enveloped in a far-reaching roseate mist drifting from the east, which flared in a wide arch of splendor vibrating spiked streamers of violet brilliancy, and from the depths of this tinging glory Saunders's weird, beautiful star slowly glided into view, absorbing the ruddy reflection, till reaching the zenith the strange fiery disc glimmered with a deepening, unflinching pink, and I discovered Saunders's star was very trying to the eyes, yet the swift changing surface of the freakish planet fascinated. Amazed, I watched the intense rose nebulous gradually pale, then lift, revealing a luminous, mottled globe, circled with a hoop of livid green flame which darkened ominously. A great black spot slowly widened, spread, and engulfed the strange orbit, which silhouetted against the flashing circle shone distinct, round as our globe.

It was a remarkable sight, but a sudden sharp pain through the eyes abruptly ended observations. I blinked against the thousands of crimson and violet discs that assail those who have looked too long at the sun and finally sought relief in frequent cold bandages and rest.

Casually metioning the matter to Saunders, he testily advised me not to do it again; give up as-

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tronomy and return to Centur, suggesting that I be quick about it; he didn't want to be bothered. I informed him of the result of my observations, to wit: That his phenomenal "discovery" was naught but a great mass of congealed vapor subject to constant disturbances and would eventually evaporate.

Saunders argued conscientiously, bringing out maps, conducting me over zigzag astral routes, and explaining that at intervals the mystic planet underwent semi-eclipse, but had observations been continued I would have noticed the oblong pink nebulous soar above the dark obstruction and caught a glimpse of an exquisite roseate scenery that was instantly obscured in thick, rolling, fiery clouds.

I let him do most of the talking, he was more up on the subject than I; but his explanations were long, tedious, and thoroughly wearied me. I decided to give up astronomy. Yes, sir! I had all I wanted of astronomy, but insisted that my suppositions were as acceptable as any—no one knows more about it than the other, which is a mercy. The science is an unfathomable mystery . . . guesswork. We are one in trillions, the neighboring lights wandering for eternity as we do and forming all manner of wild conclusions.

I soon discovered the star-gazing clique regarded Saunders much as the National Geographical-Geological societies regarded Sheldon. Saunders was not considered a crank exactly, but he was primitive, ludicrous. His statements, theories, were received with suppressed merriment. For diversion

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the wise ones propounded the most impossible problems till Saunders, like the scientist who once driven almost mad trying to solve the unsolvable, seized his grandson and burdened the undeveloped mind with the improbable. The simple straightforwardness of tender faculties foreign of worry shredded intricacies and revealed the emptiness of all mysteries. In this manner Saunders patiently answered all queries and at the same time delivered himself of a rare truth.

"A scientist," he informed them, "will sometimes, in the course of experiment, chance upon a meteoric speck problem which immediately he buries deep beneath a heap of scientific rubbish; then in absorbed contemplation of shadows that stretch inquiringly forgets all about it. A mighty problem develops with flickering memory, and in a vain attempt to recall what is lost forever researchers are invited to delve into that which takes centuries of martyred concentration to realize—wasted inspiration never returns. Occasionally in this life the problem seeker is rewarded, then he wonders why and if it was worth a life of probing.

"I don't blame them," said Saunders confidentially; "it is a wise man who makes of every task diversion. To some extent I suppose I represent what they were centuries ago, and the wide difference that does exist they chose to overlook. But I'll accomplish in less than three months what they've been experimenting upon with failure for over fifty years."

And Saunders was not at all deceived how he

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stood with the clientele. Of one thing I was positive, Saxe., dear old Saxe. was equal to his surroundings. His domineering intellect commanded respect and had no superior. How I was regarded by these wise men did not concern me. They were too advanced to meet my views and interested me as little as I did them.

\* \* \*

Before returning to Centur I thoroughly explored the strange mountain island. Declining to descend in the pulley coaches, which darted down the mountain side at regular intervals, I made my way to a narrow foot path hewed in the rocks by centuries of travel. I was accompanied part of the way by one of the Professors, who, probably anxious to be rid of me, suddenly decided I didn't interest him nohow and with remarkable speed returned to the summit. I was glad the old boy and his prosy talk were out of the way, as both had frequently made me lose my footing, and having reached a point where the path widened and travel was made easier by natural steps formed in the cliffs I was soon upon level ground, a broad open road about fifty feet wide circling the base of the mountain like a race-track and enclosed with a high fortress-like wall.

Perched haphazardly among the cliffs were odd-looking, mound-shaped stone huts, painted in all the soft tints of the rainbow. The effect was ridiculously like a huge toy, a great cone of giant marbles.

I walked entirely around the mountain before en-

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countering anything alive and had decided to make a second trip when just ahead, advancing rapidly, I spied the figure of a woman; tall, lithe, graceful. I hastened forward, then stopped, gasped and bared my head before the lovely child, for she was little more. She stopped also and gazed at me with frank, curious eyes, a faint smile curved the perfect mouth, the face was bewitching in its undeveloped, innocent beauty.

She held out her hand in welcome.

“Your name?” she asked.

“With pleasure,” I responded, “and yours?”

“Abella,” she answered simply. “But I was sure you were ‘The Virgilius.’ I never heard of With-pleasure, before.”

She laughed merrily, and beneath the searching hazel eyes my face flushed.

“I am Virgilius,” I hastened to inform her. “Virgilius Salucci.”

“‘The Virgilius!’” she cried in triumph. “I knew I could not be mistaken. Ah,” she sighed ecstatically, “‘The Virgilius,’ he who braved the dead North, that he might see the women of Centauri and impel them to revive the lost art.”

This was one way of putting it, but not exactly what I crossed the Pole for. I gazed with bold admiration at the beautiful young woman. She seemed unaware of my warm glances, and as she took my arm, smilingly inviting me to go with her, no mock modest blush marred the delicate transparency of her skin. The women of Centauri do not blush—they have nothing to blush for.

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Abella led me to the side of the mountain facing Centur, then escorted me up a long flight of steps and into one of the huge, emerald-tinted marbles. A man, busy mending fish-nets, glanced up as we entered, then hurriedly advanced to meet us. Abella gently pushed me forward and presented "The Virgilius" to—her husband!

He greeted me cordially. A massive fellow head and shoulders above me, and I a tall man. A fine man, but how did he come by such a lovely wife? For according to the matrimonial system of this land these two were not mates. Abella, aside from the peerless Alpha, was the loveliest morsel of femininity I had seen in this land of beautiful women. I contrived to see a great deal of her during my stay at the Observatory. I would descend to the village in the early morning and not return to the summit till the stars were out.

I sketched the girl in many poses. Features such as hers could be naught but beautiful, however criminal the artist, and became very friendly with the husband; a typical Centaurian, whose password was Equality. This brawny fisherman had a wonderful flow of language, his intelligence was deep, he knew when he had talked enough—a science many have still to master on our side of the world.

The man was a magnificent specimen of the strange, soulless nature of his race. Under circumstances that would have driven me mad with doubt and irritation he was calm, serene. He permitted his young, lovely wife, to spend hours in the society of one famous as Cupid.

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Distorted in his mind, Love was a grotesque, fantastic bauble, a fabulous folly; yet he claimed Love was not altogether unknown to him; it filled a good space in the history of his ancestors and during childhood, when the nights were long and wintry, he had been greatly diverted with charming, impossible tales of tenderness. He frankly told me my undertaking was most difficult—Love could not be resurrected; the Dead were dead forever.

My tuition was undoubtedly excellent, and possibly I possessed the approved modern methods, but he knew the women of Centauri, and they would tire of the study ere they mastered the rudiments. Only once did he exhibit any warmth or enthusiasm, and were I not positive he was incapable of passion. I would have declared him enamoured with the Priestess of the Sun. Her name accidentally mentioned inspired ecstasy. She was divine, and he worshipped her. But between love and worship there is a universe of difference. His wife presented the inevitable, she was his affinity, his mate, his fate. He was not indifferent, but she was not divine. They led a smooth, even, contented life together, and I am willing to wager he never cursed his idiocy for wedding, nor did she wonder daily what had become of her reason at the critical period. But in this strange, unnatural world, the old Italian adage is worn threadbare—"A woman is beautiful till she crosses the threshold of her husband's home, then she's good all the rest of her days" (translation ruinous).

The artistic, but practical, fisherman had before

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possession appreciated the ravishing beauty of Abella. These people did not differ so much from us; true, we could love, but preferred not to, whereas they were bereft of inclination; still the grand finale was marvelously similar—possession killed desire.

I had the audacity to show Abella some of my sketches. She examined them critically, and, as the Centaurians are devoid of passion so are they above deceit. This simple little fisher-girl told me I was not an artist, that my work was crude and lacked character. She took me to her brilliant overturned tea-cup of a home and showed me some of her crayons and pastels. The artist had a bold, strong stroke, rather remarkable in a woman, but taken all in all Abella did not excel in art any more than I did. Landscape was her forte, as it is with all women. At once I recognized the artistically crooked lines trailing across the faint horizon.

Women are more clever than men; they rarely attempt what is beyond them. Continual failure, due to overtaxation of capabilities, is entirely a masculine trait.

I was quite frank with Abella, and she was wonderfully patient. Women of my world ostracise unfavorable criticism, the spontaneous critic embroils and is always a boor.

Abella told me she lacked talent, but that she was beautiful.

“And how do you know?” I asked stupidly.

“My husband is the most famous artist in the world and he has told me.”

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"Excellent!" I cried. "If that mode were only popular in my land, vice would become extinct. But we have not mastered the divine power of resistance, we shrivel in egotism; and love—the genuine thrill is as much a myth in my land as in yours—is recognized as the most malignant form of insanity; marriage is the remedy which produces merciful reaction. Truly are the men of Centauri wise, their wives are ever beautiful, though unloved."

Abella threw up her hands. "How very strange, and how very unhappy you all must be!" she cried.

The dear child! So interesting to converse with one who cannot understand . . . beautiful, tedious, the two always go together; yet I had been detained a week.

Undaunted by Abella's frankness, I offered my sketches to the artist fisherman for examination. He smiled indulgently, looked them over, and desired them all, offering in return any one from his wonderful collection. I agreed, and followed him to the top of his mound-shaped home, entering a room strong with the odor of oil and paint. It was the workshop of an artist; a studio is quite another place. Near the window upon an easel was a half finished painting of sky, storm clouds, with a background of thunderous, rolling, flame-tinged vapor—the sullen red of a storm sun that no artist has as yet mastered. The picture was powerfully impressive. The fisherman was a master, his aim—individuality. But I could not admire his ideal of feminine beauty. He was the creator of a Type, elongated, sombre, gaunt, thick-lipped; yet in these

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impossible faces was that which could not be found in one woman's face in all Centauri—soul. The artist had a cunning skill, he was able to depict that which he lacked.

I looked in vain for a trace of the delicate loveliness of his wife, but in all the work scattered about the walls there was not one sketch of Abella.

He asked me if I had noticed his work in the Salon. I told him I had not yet visited the Salon.

"My work is conspicuously hung," he informed me. "You cannot overlook any of it. I am the only painter in Centauri who refrains from defacing canvas with initials. I come from a long line of artists; necessity made us fishermen; yet each in his time was the foremost painter of the age. I am that to-day; success is the heritage. Those divinely gifted with genius strive for fame, glory alone; to barter that speck of gold which the sun's rays burned in us is sacrilegious. Sol! blind my eyes forever to your golden brilliancy. I would as soon think of selling my wife Abella."

"And when you have reached fame, glory—what?" I asked.

"You do not quite understand," he quickly replied, "it is not momentary fame we seek; immortal fame is the goal we all strive for. But all who are famous cannot be immortal, yet each believe immortality the just reward; even Alpha, the Superb, yearns for immortal fame, and is wasting her gorgeous youth in the effort."

He turned to a huge stone chest or vault set in the wall; unbolting the door he invited me to enter.

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There was sufficient light from the outer room, and I saw shelves reaching from floor to ceiling laden with parchment canvases carefully covered with oil silk.

"Stored on those shelves are rare works of art representing the endless toil of my ancestors," explained the fisherman. "All were famous, but one only attained immortality. You have been to the museum?" he asked, drawing down a small canvas from an upper shelf. "Possibly you saw this picture while there; it is a portrait of Alpha the First. This is the original," he continued. "History tells us Alpha the First reigned during the era of Love, and the renowned painter, Francesco, was deeply enamoured with her. But in a mood of exaltation she renounced Love, and went in bondage to Culture, and Francesco, the painter, died of a wounded heart.

"Culture opened a new epoch in this great world of ours, but brought down malignant wrath upon Alpha the First, who being advanced beyond her era, ignored the petulance of inferiors. To her the Centaurians are indebted for the grand, vigorous race of to-day.

"Alpha the First did not long survive Francesco, the artist, whose reward for deep suffering and anguish is immortality."

I became deeply interested in the many treasures stored in the iron room, but the work of the living artist surpassed them all.

He threw up his arms and laughed when I asked to see some of his sketches of Abella.

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"She is beautiful, but does not inspire," he told me. "I fail when I attempt to portray Abella. Life, animation, is her beauty; repose, the death mask. Landscape is beautiful on canvas, but never reaches the beauty of reality. Those women up there that I know you do not admire have made me famous."

He referred to the gaunt, dark-visaged ideal.

"All Centauri recognizes them as the type of a perverted age," he continued, "showing this race has lived through and conquered degeneration. Those faces are arch, subtle, perfectly beautiful; to study them is fascinating. The scowling brows arch, the eyes take deeper tinges, and the lips—ah!"

I turned away smiling, muttering in jest.

He advised me when I returned to Centur to visit the Salon, there I would find a portrait of Abella, "which impressed, but gave dissatisfaction, lacking that which made Abella a beautiful woman."

He opened an exquisitely carved cabinet and taking out an oblong leather case, remarked: "that this was some of his first work." Then, without warning, he thrust before me a portrait of Alpha Centauri. I gasped. Skill! Powers above! Alpha Centauri stood before me, marvelously beautiful, enveloped in a broad stream of golden light, devout, with eyes and arms raised heavenward, in the Temple of the Sun. I'm not certain how I acted; men in love are usually maudlin. I had been away a long time—must return—must see, speak with her at once! I implored, begged for the portrait.

The man stared at me in amazement, then quietly

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closed the case and pressed my hand upon it—the picture was mine.

He pitied, yet could not understand. As we parted, he murmured: "Very unfortunate, great passion wasted. The women of the Great Family are sacred; the men only mate."

He invited me to call again, hoping that I would find leisure from my many engagements to promise him at least one visit before returning to my own country. His seeming sincerity was very complimentary. Flattery is a strong point with the Centaurians.

I found Abella waiting for me in the vestibule, seated in a wide, deep-silled window overlooking the bay.

Beautiful Abella—she had ceased to interest me.

"You have been long," she murmured; "but the work is wonderful."

"Your husband is a master," I replied.

She looked happy, gratified, and asked me to be seated, pointing to the place beside her. I declined, then with the brutality of indifference told her I was going, would return to Centur that evening.

"So soon!" she gasped, a startled expression coming to the sweet eyes, then she turned aside and in cold tones told me she regretted my departure. It was enough. I should have gone, but the situation tantalized gallantry. No man could have left her like that.

I drew the girl to me and slowly raised her arms till they rested around my neck. "Abella," I whis-

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pered: "You are sad that I go?" She raised the lovely eyes brimful of tears, the sweet mouth with its full red lips quivered, drooped, and was very close.

"Abella!" I murmured; then our lips met in a long, long kiss—her first kiss of love. Ah, but she was beautiful!

With a low cry she darted from me and with her face well averted bade me go.

"Go," she muttered; "go to Alpha Centauri."

With the name of the woman I worshipped reason returned. Without a word I left her—left her forever.

Abella was completely forgotten in the exciting events that followed. Possibly I acted wrong, but was innocent of harm, and did none. True, Abella had met with an experience few women of Centauri ever encounter, but I knew her brilliant eyes would be dimmed but a few minutes after my departure, and in a very little time I would cease to be anything but a remembrance, a pleasant remembrance circling in dreamy mist till submerged, obliterated.

Abella and all the women of this strange land are devoid of depth, which is the secret of their great beauty. Nothing affected them, the perfect surface challenged contact with the cold hardness of gems, ills glanced aside, leaving a placid, flawless mask.

I shall always remember Abella, but knew she had forgotten me long before I left her wonderful and unnatural world.

### CHAPTER XVI.

Saunders, whom I had not seen for several days, met me as I returned to the Observatory. Undoubtedly one of his pet experiments had gone awry, for he was peevish and spoiling for a fight. He very frankly informed me he didn't want me around any more, that arrangements were completed to start that evening upon a gigantic piece of work and no idlers wanted. "And I've spied the attraction!" he snapped. "Clear out; this is no place for such tomfoolery."

"But, Saunders!" I interrupted.

"Nonsense!" he cried. "Don't deny it. I won't have any tomfoolery around here!"

"Oh, bosh! I return to Centur to-night, anyhow," I told him; "and no harm done; they're different here."

"Tomfoolery, all tomfoolery," he grumbled, shaking his head obstinately.

An hour later, in company with a number of gentlemen, I boarded a ship bound for Centur. Saunders puttered around for fear, by some mishap, I might be left behind; but when we were ready to start he affectionately clasped my hand and informed me that I was used to his crabbedness and that it was out of gear for a crusty old chap to be in sympathy with nonsense. If his plans succeeded he would be detained at the Observatory

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only a month, then it was his intention to travel. He wanted me to run over to see him whenever I had spare time. I promised in order to get him off the ship, as he delayed departure.

We reached Centur early in the evening. The city, brilliant with lights, presented a gala appearance. The glowing houses were gaudily festooned with banners and greens, and from all floated the colors of Centauri. The streets were canopied with flags formed in arches.

When I reached the palace I knew some great event was taking place.

The immense building was ablaze with lights, and draped across the stately entrance, swaying gracefully in the light breeze, was a flag of yellow shimmering material with a huge black crescent cutting the center. The gardens were crowded with courtiers and guards, who pranced and swaggered in gay, fantastic costumes. I was observed at once and way was made for me. I heard my name carried from lip to lip and was gazed at with curiosity, bordering on impertinence. In the usually deserted halls of the palace stalked bold, dashing cavaliers, who saluted me respectfully as I entered, but uttered irreverent undertones, which they thought I could not understand. In confusion I stumbled over my own feet, then became enraged at the cruel guffaws only half suppressed. With relief I spied Mike's familiar face as he hurried to meet me and, with unnecessary speed, rushed me to my apartments and immediately proceeded with my toilet. I was shaved, anointed, curled,

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my hands dipped in scented water—I felt so effeminate.

“You are to present yourself at once to Alpha Centauri,” said Mike, “hence my haste.”

“She expected me to arrive this evening?” I gasped eagerly.

“No,” Mike answered: “she gave this order when you departed, doubtless expecting your early return, then forgot all about it; but I obey. There is great rejoicing in the city and much doing in the palace.”

“What’s going on?”

“The King of the Vespa Belt has honored us with his long-promised visit,” he replied.

“The King!” I cried. “What King? I thought Centauri ruled over all this land.”

“He does,” Mike informed me, “but not the crescent Belt, separated from us by the Great Ocean, and comprising one-third of this half of the globe. Like the dark races the white people have divided into two. They are wonderful, these people of the Vespa Belt, so-called, because in war they cling together and fight like hornets. But civilization is slow with them; they do not progress and are ruled by the passions. They still love, hate, and still have their King who, however, is good, wise, and rules through kindness. He is a descendant of the resolute, daring immortal Benlial, who abolished the army and navy. We think a great deal of the Vespa people; they regard us with affection, and in time will join us. Centauri has often visited the Vespa Belt, but this is the first time Benlial ever stepped

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upon Centauri soil. He has some mighty scheme, or he would never take the trip over the Great Ocean at his age. He greatly surprised us, heralding his approach just twelve hours ahead with gigantic flaring images of himself across a midnight sky, but we gave him a royal welcome.

"Centauri is with your friend, the famous Sheldon, in the Ocsta Mountains; he has been apprised of the King's visit and is expected any moment. Benlial has been with us two days, the guest of Alpha Centauri."

"What's the mysterious motive back of the King's visit?" I asked.

"The unification of the white race," answered Mike.

"So you told me before," I snapped; "how does he intend to accomplish it?"

"Marriage," was the monosyllabic reply.

God! A sudden weakness came over me, and my head sank heavily upon the back of the chair. Mike turned aside, his action irritated me and, impatiently, I bade him continue with his news and omit nothing.

"The King wishes the hand of Alpha Centauri in marriage for his son, Prince Benlial. They are all Benlials, you know," Mike explained. "Should the marriage take place the Vespas and Centauris are one, but never in the history of the Great Family have the feminine members mated. They are divine, and all, at a certain age, are with much pomp and festivity, publicly wedded to the Sun. Alpha Centauri became the bride of the Sun ten

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years ago. The men of the Great Family mate with whom they please. The mother of Alpha was an Octroonga, fairer than her race and surpassingly beautiful. Progression is wonderful, it makes simple the impossible. A century ago such a union as now contemplated would have been looked upon as sacrilegious, now it is considered. Alpha Centauri is the last of her name; should she die unmated the Great Family becomes extinct. The marriage may take place, but the Priestess of the Sun is a superb enigma, unapproachable, illusive as the star which guides the destiny of her family."

I ceased being a fool, bah! the man gossiped; yet I drank eagerly the greenish liqueur handed to me. It warmed my chilled blood, the color flushed my face, and boldly I mingled with the jolly Vespas that had invaded the palace. I hurried down the crowded rooms, oblivious of the curious glances leveled upon me. Alpha Centauri stood at the gates of her miniature forest of exotic plants and perfumed lakes.

I marveled at the wondrous woman; never had she seemed so exquisitely beautiful, gorgeously gowned, covered with blazing gems, even coiled midst the raven locks rippling to her feet, yet crowned with the dull gold cap, symbol of the Sun. But the woman was changed, the glorious eyes heavy-lidded, always veiled, now flashed with brilliant intellectuality, the sweet lips parted in a gracious smile, and her form swayed with gentle grace in conversation.

Alpha Centauri was transformed, transformed

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into a glorious creature of the earth. The cold, repellent, mystical sphinx was no more, and it was I—I who had forced her from her pedestal into the pulsing, passionate arms of Life. She was mine! I created her! The fabulous creature of my dreams, the ideal was realized.

Fears vanished. I was confident, supreme. The force of my adoration would draw this woman to me as now my ardent glances drew her eyes to mine. The fair face flushed and impulsively she threw out her arms in glad welcome. I hurried to her, yet my quick glance embraced the man beside her. Father Neptune, as I live! Giant in form with heavy locks and beard; gross, flushed, jolly, with sharp, pale eyes that flashed intense admiration upon the lovely girl at his side.

Alpha murmured a welcome as I raised her hand to my lips, then presented me to the King of the Vespa Belt. He extended his hand graciously, and in condescension resembled all the little kings of my world.

He spoke in a deep bass and gave me to understand he was pleased to meet "The Virgilius," who came from the other side, while his sharp, little eyes plainly asked—and, what the devil did you come for?

But he was an entertaining old boy, a clever reconteur; his forceful manner and rather coarse wit rolled around an eloquent tongue compelling laughter though one should not. He thoroughly enjoyed his own risque jests, and I never heard the finale of a racy affair wherein figured a disheveled dam-

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sel and a ship in mid-air fluttering disastrously, for sudden cheers and shouts of "Centauri!" rang from the gardens and echoed through the great halls. People crowded to the windows and into the vestibule, but the throngs hushed and parted as old Centauri entered, tall, grave with heavy dignity. I tarried not to watch the greeting between the two great men, but drew Alpha deeper into her ethereal forest, far amid dim lights and slumbering birds, the air heavy with pungent odors of strange blossoms. She sank upon a mossy couch. With a sigh of ecstasy I flung myself at her feet.

"You did miss me a little?" I asked.

She smiled softly and gazed musingly at me.

"Yes, a little," she finally answered. "I wanted some one to talk to who would understand. I've spent hours in idleness and dreams, yet have not wasted time. I have formed plans, brilliant plans for the future, which appears rosy and hopeful. The chill of cold facts are freed from my being, the world is brighter, gayer. I am wondrously beautiful, and have discovered there is happiness, much happiness in foolishness. Virgilius, my whole life has changed. Now I live—live, and would not return to the old existence for a world full of knowledge. I am raised supreme in vast expectations. I worship, ah! an image of my brain. I love deeply, wholly, a man—I've never seen!"

She leaned back against a giant plant, and with voluptuously uplifted arms smiled the smile of selfishness, rapt in her own passion, cruelly oblivious to the despair she inflicted.

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"Yes," she continued. "I have learned the lesson. I have mastered the science of Love, the key to all emotion, the passion root of humanity, which a universe of knowledge cannot wither. Yet does my faith follow me in this new life. Sol is my god, and the god of the universe—immortality, the supreme reward.

"This phantom which inspires me exists, it is ordained we meet. There is a wave of emotion deeper, stronger than mine, so powerful my soul is drawn from me. I visited the laboratory this morning, the first visit in days. The valuable liquid of eternal youth had evaporated, the ingredients clung to the side of the vessels in fine powder; all was a dead loss, the work of years in ruins, yet I felt no regret; and while I mused upon the sinful waste and wondered at my indifference, I was startled by a rushing, flooding noise, and the dense white film which suddenly descended clouding my sight, but fear quieted in silvery sweet sounds. Then gradually the mist floated, undulated, and shaped into a hovering, indistinct form that beckoned—with a shriek I regained my senses. And, Virgilius, though our souls met, communed in the laboratory, I imagined I was here, alone with my flowers and birds—we meet here, my affinity! I am impatient."

For the second she forgot me entirely in some sweet reverie, then with a start roused herself. The lovely face changed sharply and I was jarred by the conventional laugh that chills. She rose hastily.

"Come, Virgilius," she commanded, "return

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with me; we should never have dallied in this dim retreat."

She hurried forward. I sprang to my feet and followed her.

"Alpha," I called, catching her arm. "King Benlial, what message does he take to his son, the Prince?"

For an instant she seemed puzzled. Then her great eyes blazed scornfully. "I am the Priestess of the Sun!" she cried. "I worship a god! My descendants shall unite the white races."

She hurried away, and I sighed with relief, but chuckled gleefully as I thought of the chagrin of old Benlial. He and Centauri had left the hall hours ago, presumably to discuss affairs of state.

I joined the group surrounding the fair Priestess of the Sun and edged my way to her side. The guests were departing reluctantly. I thought they would never go, but at last Alpha and I remained alone in the great, brilliantly lit rooms.

"Good-night, Virgilius," she murmured, as I raised her hand to my lips. "Come on the morrow as early as you wish, I will tell you of my plans."

She tried to free her hand, then smiled softly. The tender light in her eyes emboldened me. I drew her to me and flung my arms around her. "You who love so deeply and truly," I whispered; "why, ah, Alpha, are you so cruel to me?"

"Oh, you do not understand love at all!" she interrupted, quickly passing from my embrace. "You did not willingly love, you were forced into it—and you love a woman. With you, Love is

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passion, desire, recreation; you will outlive it and love as deeply again. In your mind is ample space for other thoughts. You are not my affinity. It was not destined we should mate. I adore till death and for the sake of adoring, it is absolute. I love a god, perfect mentally, physically. Should the substance lack either perfection, it is fate, and I'll be true to the shadow. Ah, Virgilius, I am not ungrateful. I do not forget it is to you I owe this wondrous new existence, and—well—it is late; I will see you in the morning."

All women have ideals, those lacking this sweet sentiment are not worth winning. Alpha, the beautiful, was only a woman after all, passionately enamoured with an ideal she would never meet. An ideal—fiddlesticks! I inspired this passion for a shadow. Alpha Centauri is mine. I created her.

## CHAPTER XVII.

The heat was intense. It was impossible to remain in my rooms, and my nerves were at such tension that I decided to hunt up Saxe. for relaxation. I knew I would find him awake and busy; he always worked at night, declaring the brain was clearer, more vigorous during the dark hours, and that all great ideas have been figured out by candle light. I softly stepped into the hall, the dim lights flickered in a slight draught, all seemed silent, yet distinctly a low murmur of voices reached me. I hurried down the broad vista of shining stairs, the

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bronze entrance stood wide as always, there were no sentinels in this wondrous land of harmony. As I neared the grand vestibule, the voices raised loud, discordant in angry dispute, and I paused in astonishment. A brilliant light suddenly flared from the Audience, or Throne Room, where royal magnificence defied comparison. A sultry silence, followed by the rustling of silks, warned me I had barely time to conceal myself behind the huge fluted column which supported the dome, when a door swung wide and Alpha Centauri stepped out, her bearing that of a Queen, a disdainful, arrogant Queen. By her side was the Vespa King, wild with rage; in the rear Centauri stood, arms uplifted in dismay and bewilderment.

"At least meet Prince Benlial," snorted the angry King, trying to detain her. Alpha gazed scornfully upon him.

"I do not refuse to meet the Prince," she answered, "but shall be absent from Centur indefinitely. However, when I return will give him an audience."

"Bah!" scoffed the King, unable to control his fury. "Leave the veneer for publicity; we are alone, be natural. You must meet my son, and cold, superior, as you think you are, you will——."

Quickly she raised her hand, commanding silence.

"Useless!" she told him. "You have my decision. I am the Priestess of the Sun, and shall never wed."

She walked slowly away, the King watched her with bulging eyes, too furious for speech. Suddenly she turned and flashed him a brilliant smile.

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"My greetings to Prince Benlial. Should he ever visit Centur, a royal welcome awaits him."

She courtesied deeply in mockery; the interview was at an end.

The King stamped with rage and would have followed her, but Centauri remonstrated and drew him into the room, gently closing the door.

Alpha paused, shrugged her shoulders, and glanced disdainfully at the closed door.

"The Prince of the Vespa Belt—ouff!" she muttered. Then she flung her arms high and whispered in adoration: "I am true, faithful; yours entirely." Her eyes closed in passionate ecstasy, a smile of exquisite joy stole over the lovely features, as in a dream she proceeded on her way.

I watched till she passed from view. She had learned the lesson well—an apt pupil who had not been taught, who had never forgotten. Remembrance had tarnished, a slight pressure upon the fabulous spring and the sensitive wires vibrated with rejuvenated vigor. Hurray! return to your Belt, oh Vespa King—sic!

Accosting the first pedestrian I inquired the way to Professor Saxlehner. Following directions, I soon reached Saxe.'s dwelling, which was brilliantly lit from top to bottom. The house seemed all frontage, wide, flat, and very shallow. I touched a conspicuous knob, the door startled me, as, clang-ing violently, it slid up. There stood Saxe. at the far end of the hall waiting for the intruder, but seeing me he shouted welcome.

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"Thought you intended to stay for good with Saunders," he told me after the greeting. "What consumed the time? Surely not Saunders! Never mind, tell it to me later. The Centaurians do things in style; my workshop is a great improvement upon the old one, but, confidentially, Virgilius, give me the attic every time; there the ideas came without wasting hours thinking them up. This luxury inspires yawns. I don't see how these people ever made such rapid headway."

And Saxe. was right, the place resembled a lady's boudoir, all silken cushions, soft carpets and rainbow tints.

"But it's pleasant to rest here when I'm tired," he continued. "I don't object to the frippery, it's all in a lifetime. The rear is serious enough."

"And breeches more comfortable, eh, Saxe.?" I nudged him.

"No comparison, my boy!" he replied. "I'm done with petticoats, a man can't do anything in them but try to look pretty. No wonder women spend most of their lives primping, it's the petticoats. I've found a tailor who knows his business. Imagine us returning to our own land rigged up in the sort of thing you've got on! Yes, sir! I feel like Saxlehner now. Sheldon's done the same thing; says the climate of the Ocstas is too arctic for tights."

I decided to don trousers again.

"Yes," Saxe. advised, "bundle the drapery out; it makes you look like the bearded lady. Now for

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the *Propellier*. The new machine is a great improvement upon the old one; the defects of the first are remedied in the second—don't advertise it."

He showed me two or three tiny wheels, several great long screws and rivets, and two gigantic pieces of filigree work cast in glittering metal.

"Pure gold," he informed me, "cast in crystal molds over a furnace of electricity. It took me several days planning and figuring for the molds, yet, by George! the factory delivered them in a few hours. That's rapid work for you! Molds should always be of crystal."

"But the gold!" I interrupted; "is the whole machine to be cast in gold?"

"Of course! What of it?" he cried. "It's manufactured by wholesale and on the market like lumber. Look here."

He opened the adjoining room and showed me the gold stacked up in blocks ready for use.

"Is it absolutely pure?" I asked.

"Well," he replied, "it's stood every test I've made upon it. Beyond doubt it's the same article that's so scarce on our side. I held out for steel, but the durability of gold was pointed out, and it was explained the *Propellier* would be in the museum for all time, and gold was the metal. I wouldn't argue with them. They are going to publish books with exquisite illustrations, the date and details of when Potolili first sighted us and the car. Little guide books will be issued, explaining all about the strange little steel car and gold *Propellier*, presented to the people of Centauri by the renowned

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Professor Saxlehner. 'Renowned Saxlehner' sounds first rate—ahem! Now look at this." He opened a small box stuffed with silk floss and took out a huge diamond the size and shape of a pecan and of dazzling brilliancy. "For the *Propellier*," he explained; "a perfect gem without a flaw, yet not genuine. Yes, Virgilius, the Centaurians have discovered the secret; this stone is as perfect as any ever taken from the mines. Before returning home I shall master the intricate combination of gold blocks and diamonds. Nearly all the genuine gems of Centauri have been placed in the museum. The manufactured article is the standard; man's ingenuity is rated invaluable. Notice the ruby, it contains a fire never seen in the most famous gems of our world; but the stone that defies penetration is the emerald. It guards its secret well and is very rare. Many have attempted to produce the stone and turned out fairly good imitations, but imitation was failure, a perfect emerald must be produced. Half a century ago a noted scientist delved into the mystery of the emerald. In his efforts to get ahead of competitors he experimented upon the sacred emerald loaned to him from the museum and actually reduced it to liquid. Old Centauri was sent for and found the scientist frantically trying to analyze the liquid, under the impression it would shortly petrify again, but, to the amazement of both, the strange greenish liquid dwindled and evaporated—that ended the emerald problem with the scientist. He succumbed to an ailment unknown to physicians, and it is believed he inhaled the emer-

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ald. Scientists declare the fatal incident analyzed the emerald. The gem is composed of congealed poisonous gases petrified. The emerald man became famous because he came nearer solving the green mystery, but his secret died with him. When pressed to divulge he replied: 'My experiment failed; had I produced the perfect stone the knowledge would have been free to all. I produced nothing and lost the emerald, as I feared I would. Failures are enervating, should remain obscure; the time in this sphere is too short to ponder over them.'"

Saxe. told me many curious things about the Centaurians and their wonderful discoveries. We talked till daybreak. He made me promise to visit him daily and be useful, but it was several months before Saxe. and I met again. I returned to the palace and wandered in the gardens, waiting impatiently for the summons from Alpha Centauri. But I was disappointed; though I sent many messages, she refused to see me that day and, woman-like, gave no reasons. I idled the glorious morning away in the gardens, then towards noon started for the city in quest of Saxe.'s intelligent tailor. The man seemed to regard my order as an honor, and to my request promised to give it his personal attention and I would have the garments as early as I desired. He informed me the costume was ancient, but occasionally seen on the stage, and there was a general impression the mountaineers of the Vespa Belt still wore it.

He took my measure and again promised to accommodate me at the earliest possible moment. I

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decided the next time Alpha and I met she would behold a gentleman of the period of my world.

Strolling leisurely about the city, pondering upon the advisability of visiting Saxe. again, I suddenly sighted a tall, majestic building, whose portals stood wide with a gigantic statue of the angel Genius, smiling a welcome. It was the Salon, and remembering the artistic fisherman and fair Abella, I entered the gallery with much curiosity. I remained till sun-down. The fisherman's work was above and beyond anything in the gallery, not for merit, but originality. He aimed at the mysterious, the startling, and charmed the imagination. An artist who daringly flings upon the world a picture of dull sky and half-obsured moon is a master.

Originality is the child of imagination; Fame, the blossom.

There were many clever artists in this strange land, possibly more clever than the extraordinary fisherman, but their work lacked individuality and, paled into insignificance before the wild combination of vivid, gaudy shades blended by the greatest artist in the world.

But as I viewed the portrait of the beauteous Abella, my admiration for her husband's art dwindled considerably. In the pink-and-white, simpering portrait the artist betrayed his lack of skill; he failed utterly to produce Abella's delicate archness and made her loveliness a type to compare with his strange ideal of pervertness. A long panel canvas revealed the dark-browed, intense production posed impossibly statuesque; deep, gloomy, intelli-

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gent eyes, the whole vivid with that which was lacking in the painted prettiness of Abella. It was a masterstroke placing the two side by side, the one fair, smiling, shallow, the other dark, wintry, magnetic. The failure was obscured; the ideal charmed the eye and attention.

I was wondering which type I admired when startled by the sudden flare of lights in the building —the signal of the setting sun—and instantly forgot all types but one and hurried away in happy anticipation.

I found Mike greatly perturbed. He told me every one in the palace had been thrown in great confusion by the tempestuous King of the Vespa Belt.

“Alpha Centauri honors the traditions of her family,” he informed me. “She proclaims herself Priestess of the Sun, and that her celestial duties do not include the unification of the white race. King Benlial departed at sun-down. Friendly relations between the two countries are at an end. Centauri and his daughter escorted the wrathy King to his ship. In loud, excited tones, he told them the Prince would visit Centur. ‘Greetings,’ Alpha replied, ‘the people of Centur will welcome the Prince when honored by his presence.’ Her stateliness, serenity, superiority to the man before her—it was sacrilegious to dream of mating her with the son of such a barbarian!”

Mike waxed indignant.

“Centauri watched the departure of their royal visitor till the ship was out of sight,” he continued,

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"then seeing me near, the Priestess of the Sun beckoned and bade me tell you she would consult with you in the morning."

"I will not see her to-day at all then!" I cried.

Mike shrugged his shoulders.

"She is closeted with her father, deep in discussion of important state matters," he told me.

"Will the Prince visit the city?" I foolishly asked.

Without the least hesitancy he replied: "Certainly; Alpha must mate, the last of her people. Prince Benlial may prove worthy."

This was consoling. I dismissed him and, weary, disappointed, retired. My slumbers were disturbed with lurid visions of Prince Benlial, and one poppy scene more vivid than others roused me with heart-ache and I awoke moaning. The sun streamed into the room, a slanting flame seared straight across my eyes, but through the blur I saw Mike tip-toeing about with disapproving glances fixed upon a heap of clothing fragrant with newness. He strenuously objected to the new clothing, but curious, and unable to assist me, keenly watched my preparations. When I stood complete before him he turned me around admiringly.

"You look very well," he remarked; "but appeared better yesterday."

"Nonsense!" I retorted. "I look better and feel more like myself now than since entering Centur."

He smiled, bowing deeply.

"Alpha Centauri awaits you," he said. "You were to be so informed the moment of awakening."

I pushed him aside, shaking my fist at his

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chuckle and hurried to meet the sweet woman who was certainly making life a very unhappy problem for me. She received me with a veiled glance and smiled tenderly as I raised her hand to my lips. I chided her for breaking her appointments.

"Ah, Virgilius," she replied. "No plans could be perfected till the departure of wrathy King Ben-lial. I am not divine, and love begets selfishness. I will not sacrifice myself for the people."

The Vespa Prince—finis!

We spent the entire day together. Over and over again she told of her deep infatuation for—nothing. Poetically, impassionately, she described the image of her dreams, and no man on earth could ever reach the perfections of the idol this girl had erected to worship. Then I learned of her plans. Alpha Centauri, for the first time in her life, was to leave Centur and tour the world. A large party of friends had been invited to travel with her and the government ship *Centur* was placed at her disposal.

"I have frequently been urged to do this," she told me; "advised that I should become familiar with the world I would some day rule; but I demurred; science was more interesting. I lived a painfully narrow life—what a wonderfully different view you have created! Virgilius, I go in search of the god of my dreams."

And the secret was out. Alpha Centauri would search for and, if possible, possess this man of her imagination, and forever bring damnation upon her soul. What woman is happy with the individual she thinks her affinity?

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"Suppose your search should prove futile," I maliciously suggested.

"That is impossible," she replied confidently; "my love exists."

I inquired if she would visit the Vespa Belt.

"No," she answered quickly. "My ideal could not be found among the Vespa people; but we shall sail low and slowly over the Belt that you may see it. It will take about two days to sail from one point of the crescent to the other and five days of stormy weather over the vast waters that separates the Belt from this land. Altogether we shall be absent many months. Centauri does not accompany us; he is much interested in the daring exploits of your great friend, Sheldon, and will pass most of the time in the Ocstas—and, Virgilius, we sail to-morrow evening at sun-down."

### CHAPTER XVIII.

The following day was one of excitement and petty anxieties. I constantly feared the wonderful young woman would, at the last moment, change her mind and electing to remain faithful to her "Fancy," declare the tour off. But I was far from understanding Alpha Centauri. She directed preparations with a cool energy that was beyond alteration, and impatient to depart, would have sailed from Centur before noon but superstition prevailed —a lucky voyage must always be started at sun-down.

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I accompanied Alpha to the Temple of the Sun where she led the high-noon devotions. For the time she forgot her new emotions in fanatical worship of the Sun as the broad rays streamed upon her. All Centur knew she would that evening set out to see the world, and people crowded the streets to cheer their beloved Priestess and wish her bon voyage. They cheered her beauty and piety, and because she had sent King Benlial to his Belt disappointed. I alone knew the object of the tour.

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That evening, at sun-down, we boarded the good ship *Centur*. As the great wings fluttered and the vessel slowly rose, vast crowds shouted good luck to us, and Alpha waved the colors of Centauri in response. Then suddenly we darted ahead into infinite blue plains and the search for a god began.

It is impossible to describe the many strange, wonderful sights seen upon those travels. We skimmed swiftly over marvelous violet-blurred cities, dense forests cut with silvery, winding streams, and over long snow-capped mountain ranges. Frequently the ship fluttered to earth, and a day was idled away in fishing or gathering wild fruit and flowers, and once we nestled upon a lofty peak that pierced the clouds and viewed the mountain girdled with sleet, ice and snow, yet where we rested the grass grew rank, and some delicate pink blossoms I gathered drooped at the breast of Alpha Centauri.

It took nearly two days to cross a great tract of

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prairie land and we flew with dizzy velocity over five great oceans; the roaring, mountainous waves swirled frantic for life. It seemed impossible ships ever navigated these fierce waters, yet they did centuries ago, but disasters had been appalling. As we gazed downward, awed by the stupendous vastness of the earth, the universe, we reverently pondered over the reason of this gigantic creation.

“Bred of Sol, Virgilius. It is the true faith; how obscured the intellect that reasons otherwise. Sol, do not doubt, Virgilius, Sol always.”

Argument is more debilitating than cold in the head. The extraordinary belief of this beautiful Centaurian made her adamant, and I desired the woman, not the belief.

We visited all the large cities of this world; great cities of commerce and gigantic industry, and were royally entertained. Our approach, heralded hours in advance, signaled great festivities. These people of advanced views proclaimed Wisdom sovereign, but Old Centauri is monarch of this land of wise men, and Equality is as mythical here as in my world. The Great Family is supreme, and Alpha, my Alpha, is Princess of Centauri.

One continual nationality lacks individuality; travel in my world is far more interesting, yet Centauri is beautiful, a wonderful vision of superb development; but see one city and you've seen them all.

Alpha Centauri entered these marvelous cities quivering with expectations, radiant with hope, but departure was invariably hastened by bitter dis-

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appointment and, in despair, she finally suggested the return to Centur. I brusquely advised her to continue traveling, reminding her that once in Centur all hope was ended. Then endeavoring to console I talked long and earnestly about ideals never realized and succeeded in rousing anger, which is better. She reproached me for "planting this image of torture in my brain," and "you class me with the absurdities of six centuries ago."

"Ah, Virgilius," she continued: "this phantom of my brain has an adoration far exceeding mine, a powerful magnetism forced me upon this tour. All ideas, no matter how fabulous, have had previous existence. What the brain conceives can be realized; nothing is impossible. Life is the most fabulous illusion in the universe—a marvelous creation of Sol. Virgilius, the magnetism of your idea forced you into a stupendous folly, but you realized."

"I realize, but it does not bring me peace or happiness," I retorted.

"You sought and worshipped beyond your sphere," she quickly answered. "The current of Thought met, crashed, and lost power in evaporation; the union of magnets creates disaster. Virgilius, I have a great longing to return to Centur, some force urges me. To travel farther is needless. Ah, how selfish is my passion! I follow your advice, the tour continues."

So we sailed onward, and into a corner of her vast knowledge Alpha Centauri stored the wisdom of deceit. She smiled and appeared gay,

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happy, when heart-sick, disappointed and bored. She preferred solitude, lost her brilliant coloring and the grave, frank eyes became dull, fatigued. Those traveling with us paid little heed to her erratic ways, believing she was deep in the study of some new scientific discovery—which she was—and had it not been for my pleasant surroundings it would have been a toss-up between the air ship and Saxe. After all, Saxe. & Co. were to be envied. The *Propellier* was faithful to Saxe., the stars true to Saunders. Only Sheldon and myself were excavating with doubts as to our landing.

Alpha Centauri had gathered about her many charming people, their entertaining company made life bearable during the tedious ending of the tour. There were several ladies with husbands, two young girls with cavaliers, and an interesting Mamma who did the talking for them. The girls were very pretty and the cavaliers devoted. One was a young doctor—we've all met him. The other was a descendant of the man who melted the emerald and kept it to himself. Naturally the young man was rather mournful and stilted, his pride was inherited—keeping a secret is a most acrobatic feat. There was a companionable literary man constantly deep in inspired thought. He did not alarm with allusions to the plot of his forthcoming book, but occasionally boasted of a world of his own—as they all do—and limited his conversation to current topics. His briefness was fascinating—an art.

Then we had a mineralogist whose deep scientific

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problem was—sleep. Occasionally he woke up and became as frisky as a boy of fifty. His wife was the only woman I ever met who could keep up an incessant chatter and still be interesting. There was a tragedian, playwright, all in one, including a wife. The tragedies this gentleman wrote were excellent farces. He was the greatest humorist of the time. His wit was sharp, broad and frequently coarse, but he handled his subject with such rare delicacy that it took a couple of days to discover that he shouldn't have told the joke and we shouldn't have laughed. The wife was a beautiful, fair woman of that type that most men are willing some other fellow shall possess.

Everybody was very kind to me, and were I not so desperately in love and therefore desperately unhappy, I would have greatly enjoyed the trip throughout this strange land.

The country was rapidly changing in appearance. We sailed over a range of burnt, dwarfed mountains enclosing completely a vast desert which narrowed to meet a neck of land that stretched across the ocean, connecting Centauri with the Vespa Belt. This connecting land was fifty miles long, twenty wide, and most of the time submerged.

“You are viewing the ancient battlefield of the Vespas and Centauris,” the literary man informed me. “The last war they had lasted forty years, closed with carnage, and should be eliminated from history. The reading is not elevating and neither have anything to be proud of. It occurred during the early ages when civilization ignored the earth

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which was inhabited by savages and beasts, the beasts being superior and more humane. What the war was over I've never discovered, nor has any one else; but it was conducted upon the most hellish plans. During one engagement the Vespas invaded too deeply the Centauri desert, their idea to surprise the enemy, who were ambushed in the hills. They were permitted to advance well inland, then suddenly the Centauris appeared and surrounded them. Not one Vespa returned to the Belt, but scouts informed the crescent people what had happened. The ancient King Benlial was a demon, the Vespas were enraged, and early the following day the Centauris were astounded to see another Vespa army marching across the neck. The Centaurians yelled their scorn of the advancing army and rushed to meet it. The battle was fought upon the peninsular, the Vespas gradually retreating; then suddenly, as though panic-stricken, turned tail and fled. The Centaurians, wild, drunk with victory, pursued them closely and at first did not see the tremendous wall of water rising, cutting off all escape. They realized when the land sank and mountainous waves engulfed them. It was a fiendish revenge; the Vespas are rightly named."

The literary man gave a shrug of disgust. I had passed from his vision long ago. He was conversing with himself, a habit most literary people effect, and he walked away as unconcernedly as though I'd never existed. I wondered if he had really repeated history or simply reviewed a scene from his new romance.

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We were crossing this historical neck of land now and all were on deck, gazing curiously at the dim outlines of the Vespa Belt.

Alpha Centauri joined us, pale, listless, heavy-eyed, and gave orders for low sailing that we could more distinctly view the possessions of King Beniall. She confidentially told me she would remain in seclusion during the journey over the Vespa Belt, and mournfully shook her head when I begged permission to visit her.

"The Vespa Belt has no charms for me," she murmured. "Ah, Virgilius, do not be down-hearted, you have taught me the value of unhappiness, life is incomplete without it. I am not despondent, but tortured with doubts; he whom I seek waits at Centur, but I have suffered disappointment so often I dread another. Do not think of me, join the others. I shall not see you again till we are crossing the Great Ocean."

She sighed heavily and entered her cabin before I could prevent. The door closed between us and bitterly I regretted teaching her the knowledge of misery. Love had robbed her of individuality, damning her with a craving for the unattainable worse than death, whose soothing balm of peace, rest and vacant identity was far more cheerful than eternal yearning. From my heart I wished I could make her the radiant, soulless, happy creature she was before we met. I would give all I possess if I had never crossed the Pole, and suddenly a longing came over me to see once again dear old Middleton.

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Traitorous thoughts galloped upon me. I had become enamoured with a bright, glorious vision. Reproaches, sad eyes, mournfulness were killing my passion. Bah! the vision still exists; I created it; but Centauri, who enslaved me, was fading.

I joined the others, who were leaning over the ship's side, gazing curiously at a village we were sailing over. We could see the people crowding into the narrow streets and from our ship came a faint report, followed by a cloud of deep violet smoke which curled upward, twisted and looped till finally the word "Centauri" floated in space beside us. At the sight the crowds below shouted and cheered; we bellowed response. Toward evening we passed over a lovely bay, the air was soft, balmy and we remained upon deck till near midnight. The time passed swiftly between the Literary Man and Humorist, while the ladies sang in clear, sweet voices. We turned in when a sudden icy squall struck us, and the last view we had of the new country was of dark, gloomy mountains.

Next morning before sun-rise I was on deck, but my traveling companions were earlier and joshed me unmercifully. The Literary Man was persistently witty about oversleeping—he'd been up all night and regaled us about the wondrous sights we'd missed. We had sailed over three great cities brilliant with light, humming with revelry, some celebration going on. "And," he continued, "these Vespa savages have built wonderful cities of superb architecture. I think we're approaching the royal city of Benlial. See the height of those monstrous

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domes, the steeple of one temple has tried to pierce the sun. The ancient city of Benlial has for ages been the theme of poets."

We were sailing over vast grain fields and meadow-land where thousands of cattle grazed, and far in the distance, gleaming white, phantom-like through the mist, we saw a great city. As we neared this spectral, poem city, the mist cleared before the strong, hot rays of the rising sun, and beneath us stretched a scene of fabulous beauty. Thoroughfares of marble lined with gigantic palms, whose huge branches arched from side to side, high domed buildings of pure white marble surrounded with vast gardens gorgeous with bloom. Poverty could not exist in this luxurious city. The ship sailed lower that we might view closer this paradise of earth. Nestling in the center of extensive gardens, miniature lakes and streams, forced cataracts and high spraying fountains was the jewel-like palace of Benlial—a long, flat, shining building.

"Here in the heart of civilization is a barbaric relic of what the Vespa people were," remarked the Literary Man. "They have been working centuries upon that palace and are still adding to it; it will never be completed. The architecture is valuable only for antiquity and hideousness," he continued, "and tasks the ingenuity of modern architects to follow the original plan. The building is entirely of mosaic."

"Taken as a whole it is of remarkable beauty," I blurted out. "There's not another building to compare with it in the wide world."

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Everybody became greatly interested in the strange palace with its numerous domes, steeples and beautiful lacey archways—an abode for gnomes and fairies, the crown jewel of the Vespa Belt, its diadem of artistic glory. Centauri with all her wonders could not boast of any work to compare with this marvelous palace.

Slowly, reluctantly, we sailed from the superb marble city with its gleaming white edifices, mosaic palaces and vast boulevards haunting the memory, so that in dreams the beautiful scene is revisited again and again. This crescent-shaped country was cultivated from point to point, and boasted a population of over forty millions. The Vespas worshipped the Sun, but enjoyed the dusk. In Centauri twilight is unknown, and the state of progression between the two countries was not worth warring over—they were *tanto per tanto*.

The morning of the third day we reached the extreme north point of the Belt and sighted the Great Ocean. The air was misty, ice cold, and a piercing salt breeze suddenly turned to a terrific gale and tore and whistled around the ship forcing her ahead at a dizzy speed.

"We'll be out of it in a second," the literary gent assured us. "I feared we were venturing rather near the danger point. There four wind currents meet; anything caught in it is lost. The gale we're flying before is merely one of the four. Imagine the extreme north point of the crescent. It is said that at one time this land extended half across the ocean; but these four gales blowing constantly for

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ages have gradually blown the Belt to its present small dimensions. Possibly in a few centuries more the Belt will vanish and the crescent country become one of the great legends of Centauri."

The ladies laughed incredulously, but the men pretended to take the speaker seriously.

"You speak with prophetic wisdom," said the tragedian. "An interpreter of tragedies can be blunt, and his words always taken in jest. The Vespa Belt will never be swallowed by the Four Winds, but in less than ten years she will be submerged by Centauri. For perfect civilization, progression, harmony, there must be unity. I do not jest, but a tragedian is always a jester."

He was vigorously applauded and encouraged to continue, but, bowing, modestly refrained commenting further upon the subject and suggested we go above, as the wind had calmed. We trooped up on deck and were greeted by a hot, blazing sun, a deep blue sky, and a fierce ocean with mountainous waves boiling white beneath us. Far in the distance were the snow mountains and white cliffs of the Vespa Belt, which in the clear sunlight showed up a perfect crescent.

"We have entered another zone," the writing gent informed us. "We have emerged from the wind regions, and—er—ahem!—."

He ended abruptly; no one was listening to him. All looked in one direction, and, as I looked the blood rushed to my head. Alpha Centauri stepped from her cabin, radiantly beautiful, garbed in white.

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In an instant I was beside her. With passionate ardor I pressed her hand to my lips. Her face flushed delicately, pallor, dejection had vanished; her eyes gleamed and burned, she was the personification of joy.

"In a few days we will be in Centur—think what that means to me, Virgilius," she murmured.

"You are positive then?"

"As though I were already there," she replied. "He waits me. Centur ends all disappointments. I will talk with you later, this is a day of worship. I am the Priestess of the Sun."

Rising to her full height majestically she walked down the deck with upstretched arms waving toward the Sun. High, clear, rang out her clarion voice in the call to worship, and people flocked from all parts of the ship, circled around her, and kneeled.

With swaying form she chanted in low, weird tones. The glorious eyes did not blink before the dazzling rays that enveloped her. She twisted, undulated, as though to have the streaming fiery light bathe every portion of her body; then suddenly, as in ecstasy, out came the cry of devotion, high, clear, sweet. At that moment the Sun's rays slanted, and in the golden shadow the glorious Priestess stood silent, rapt; then her arms fell to her sides and devotions ended.

All rose and went about their various duties. Alpha turned to me with a smile as placid as a child's.

"Always the Priestess of the Sun," she mur-

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mured. "I love, Sol, how I love! this new worship absorbs my whole life, but—always the Priestess of the Sun, Virgilius."

I led her to the other side of the ship, away from the others.

"Virgilius," she murmured, "do not think me childish because I sought seclusion while sailing over the Belt. I did not think of the Vespas, but could conceal my unhappiness no longer. Solitude has no prying, curious eyes; I was alone, gloomy, morose, despairingly worshipping a fancy, and believe as you wish, Virgilius, I know not if I dreamed or was awake, but for the instant the veil of obscurity lifted and I saw the future. Scenes like great paintings were revealed, then slowly slid from view; only two was I permitted to gaze upon with memory. I saw the palace at Centur sparkling in the vivid light of noon. Wandering disconsolately through the halls was a form swathed in twilight. I tried to peer through the flickering dusk and listened to my name repeatedly called, frequently imploringly, always with passion. Like a magnet I was drawn within the mystic gloam; I tried to touch, to speak with the shadow, then like a flash the scene shifted and I floated over the Ocsta Mountains. Standing upon the cliffs, gazing with grave anxiety into the waters of the Otega, was your friend, the great Sheldon. Suddenly he raised his face, white, wild with terror and shouting, he leaped with great bounds from cliff to cliff. His cries brought the men from the caves and I saw my father among them, calm, magnificent, giving direc-

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tions, commanding order. I heard an awful rumbling noise, the mountains swayed as trees in the wind, the sky became suffused, lurid, the air suffocating. There was a terrific explosion, a huge funnel of fire rose, meeting the heavens, and monstrous columns of yellow, red, black smoke swallowed all nature. I shrieked in horror and obscurity clouded the frightful scene. Once more the future was a blank, dark, illusive. Virgilius, I did not sleep or dream; Centauri, Sheldon and all with them are in peril. I shall save them. Speed has been doubled, the ship travels swifter than the wind, and we will reach the mountains toward evening of the day after to-morrow. It is the fastest time ever made over the Great Ocean, and the Ocstas is the first land sighted, then—Centur. Come, Virgilius, this will never do, we must join the others. Artoisti will teach you the game he is eternally playing with Dreaisti."

Artoisti was the literary gent, and he of Dreaisti the dramatist. I argued against both gentlemen and the game, and feelingly pleaded to remain with her the afternoon. She laughingly refused to listen to me and made sport of my earnestness. We joined the others.

Artoisti called me to the table where he was playing with Dreaisti. I watched the game some time, but was soon convinced that in a hundred years I couldn't master it. It was tedious, complicated, and played with oblong ivory chips the size of a match ornamented with fine threads of color. The game seemed a mixture of chess, checkers and

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hop-scotch, played upon a board similar to the chart of the heavens. The splintery chips were twirled in the air and fell upon the chart in squares, triangles, circles. Where the tricks, points, came in I have still to discover. The gentlemen invited me to take a "flip" in the game, but I hastily retreated, amid shouts of derision.

We were warned from the deck as the ship suddenly lowered and zigzagged at terrific speed. The great wings fluttered heavily, and frequently the ship crested the turbulent waves like a monster sea-gull.

We had reached the danger zone. Safety lay in hugging the water to avoid the fierce wind currents crashing above, but we soon out-distanced danger and gradually floated upward high and higher; by noon we coursed in our accustomed sphere, but speeded on with a hurricane following swiftly. From the little signal house Alpha and I watched the storm gathering and strengthening.

"We speed ahead," she murmured; "but if caught —devotions to Sol, all is over."

I pressed her close to me; at that moment death with her seemed rapture, then she was mine forever. But I shall never forget that frightful night. The din, uproar of thunderous cannonading as great black, red, lightning-pierced clouds met the ocean was terrifying; the ship creaked and groaned threateningly in her wild flight before the hurricane.

With ill-concealed alarm I sat up all night, but the others retired as usual. The Centaurian equipoise will remain forever an enigma.

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Dawn ended our peril. We still traveled before a gale, but had outsailed the tempest. Above was a clear, blue sky, and the soft radiance of the rising sun enveloped the ship. Toward noon we reached the dead calm ocean tropics, the heat flamed upon oily, slothful waters, but we sailed with the swiftness of a bird, and far in the distance a heliotrope ridge met our vision.

"The Ocstas!" cried Alpha, delighted. "We shall reach them in the early evening."

And all day she watched till the violet line became a positive purple, gradually deepening into peak and curve with soft velvety slopes, yet as we neared the mountains I noticed, with astonishment, that they reached the water's edge without beach, perpendicular cliffs with smooth, shining surface, barren, upright, a gigantic wall that huge ocean waves dashed against in high bounding sprays.

It was rosy twilight when we sailed over these uncanny mountains so sharply divided by cold, barren cliffs on one side and deep forests, rich valleys on the other.

Anxiously Alpha gazed downward and called my attention to the ominous rumbling, which I supposed was the roar of the ocean.

"I fear we are too late," she murmured. "It seems we will never reach the place where the great Sheldon and Centauri are imperiling their lives tampering with the volcanic Otega."

In vain I tried to calm her. Words made her desperate, and as the detonations increased she clasped her hands tightly in agony. The air grew

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dense, sultry, vibrating with electricity. All scented danger, calamity and clustered together in alarmed little groups, murmuring: "The Otega; the Otega."

The ship slackened speed as we sighted the Otega, and her great wings fluttered as though about to lower. Upon earth all was agitation, the ocean boiled furiously, at high tide crashing over the steep cliff wall and flooding the land; people, panic-stricken, scurried in all directions. Then Centauri appeared. We knew him by his long white beard. The little crowd gathered about him, but suddenly, all with one accord, rushed to the side of the mountain, where, in a hollow, their ship rested. We could see them scrambling over the side of the vessel, working, tugging with desperation to loosen her. We lowered a little to give assistance, but the ship bounded free, the great bat wings vigorously unfurled; then shouts of distress coming from land startled us and we saw a man running, mad with terror. He reached the ship, grasping the side just as she lurched upward, jerking his body out with the shock, then banging it back with terrific force. I turned sick, covering my eyes—the man was Sheldon. My blood curdled as I thought of his awful death, expecting, of course, that he'd fallen to earth and was dashed to pieces, but Alpha whispered he was safe, that he'd clung to the vessel as he had to his theory and Centauri had dragged him from his awful position. I could see him lying on the deck. The two vessels sailed close and established communication. Alpha talked with her father, and I learned the great Otega would soon be in erup-

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tion after a quiet of six centuries. We lingered to view the phenomenon.

"I am glad the matter is settled for all time," murmured Alpha. "Certainly the great Sheldon's visit to Centauri has been of some benefit, his laughable theories have obtained positive results and settled forever a grave doubt to the satisfaction of every one."

She laughed as I suggested that Sheldon, to a certain extent, had been deceived.

"He deceived himself," she replied. "No one disputed his positive assertions, and consequently he believed all agreed with him, but every one went up to the Ocstas bent upon private investigations. Your friend was intent upon discovering the source of that body of water and delegates from four geographical-geological societies accompanied him solely to determine whether the volcano was extinct or not—all have been successful. Isn't it strange, Virgilius," she continued, "that water was so fresh, wholesome, beneficial to the system, yet fish could not live in it. We tried, and—"

A warning shout came from Centauri's ship. Ours shot upward like a rocket and slanted across the sky, swift as an arrow.

A terrific explosion took place, thunder rolled from the heavens, while earth responded with tremendous detonations. The incessant roaring, sizzling noise was frightful—the majestic fury of the Otega had awakened from its long trance. Sulphurous flames played about the volcano, giving it a terrible, weird appearance, steam rose in monstrous

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clouds, and waves of liquid fire boiled and dashed against the cliffs overflowing the huge caldron in broad streams of molten mass deluging the earth with devastation. Ashes, rock, lava shot skyward in monster geysers of incandescent matter that gave forth prismatic lights and in stinging, serpent-like coils writhed to the sea.

Voluminous waves hedged in the Ocostas, and their steady blaze cast a deep crimson, purple glare over the heavens that must have reached to Centur. We were ten miles away, our ship had a heavy coating of cinders and the sickening odor of sulphur suffocated. A scorching smoke devoured the air and hung like a pall over all nature, obscuring everything except the splendid, diabolical phenomenon, belching flame and lightning forking from the gigantic crested columns that shot upward hundreds of feet. It was a fearsome, stupendous spectacle.

Time seemed infinite, so absorbed had I been watching the magnificent Otega, that from a light touch I started as from a dream, mumbling gruffly.

"Awake, Virgilius, you are fascinated by the splendid Otega."

A sudden dazzling flash illuminated the ship and I saw her. She laughed teasingly as I caught her hand and pressed it against my face.

"We are going to Centur," she told me. "All lights have been extinguished. Thousands are on their way to view the volcano. Should it become known that I have returned the loyal people will

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forego that marvelous sight and accompany us back to Centur. The lava streams are rushing down the other side of the mountain into the sea. The flow will continue many days and there will be intermittent eruptions for months, then the Otega will be dormant, probably forever."

"Much damage done?"

"Some," she answered, "to the Potolilis. The Ocstas is the property of the Potolilis. They know the Otega and avoid it. There is much timber lost, but the Potolilis are a tribe of vast wealth. Centauri has ordered his ship brilliantly illuminated, so all may know he has not perished."

Our ship had ceased its aimless floating and slanted straight for Centur. Far in the distance, speeding toward the Ocstas, were thousands of red globe lights traveling thickly together, resembling the Milky Way suddenly lowered to our sphere. We darted in a westerly direction avoiding the flying multitude, which gradually sailed past like a great stream of meteors, traveling in groups or long straggling lines, and all heavily laden with sight-seers. One huge vessel, sailing apart from the others, edged us closely. She was gayly illuminated and decorated with the colors of Centauri. We did not clear her in time, and she spied our dark hulk and saluted. We flashed farther into the darkness, but the sound of gay music, wild singing, shouts and shrill laughter of the men and women aboard followed us.

"A private vessel, party of pleasure-loving young people out for a lark," I suggested.

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Alpha watched the vessel till it appeared but a pale stream of light against the sky.

"Possibly a wedding party," she replied. "But the ship floated the colors, which signals some great personage aboard. Banners are hoisted only upon national fête days. This ship carried the flag of Centauri. Odd this particular ship should stray aside just as we pass to nearly collide with us."

She gazed perplexedly into the darkness and silently, thoughtfully, studied the starry horizon, then with a murmured "Good night" and gentle hand-clasp she left me.

Suddenly our ship blazed with lights and the Centauri banners were hoisted. We cut sharply across the heavens separating entirely from the speeding sightseers, our lights only distinguishable. No one dreamed Alpha Centauri was returning to Centur.

"It is three hours on the new day, why do you not retire?" a deep voice rumbled close to my ear.

With a start I turned and confronted the Literary Man.

"Why don't you seek rest yourself?" I snapped.

"I have rested too long. I am far in arrears with my work, but have put everything aside to complete an Ode upon the joyful emotions Alpha Centauri is supposed to entertain when beholding Centur once again."

His eyes twinkled and he chuckled without smiling.

"You are humorous," I told him. "Do you doubt the joyful emotions?"

"I never answer questions," he replied. "They al-

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ways lead to argument and time is too limited for that. An argument should last at least a month, both sides talking all the time. How very young, inexperienced, you must be, Virgilius; you still have to discover that women have no emotions. The Centaurians are all humorists, tragedy is an obliterated evil; and, Virgilius, we reach Centur at sunrise. I must go and finish my Ode to Joy. We will meet again."

He hurried away, chuckling, glancing over his shoulder to smile good-humoredly at me. Alone, a sudden depression came upon me. I was living in a nerve-racking atmosphere of doubt and anxiety. Dejectedly I entered my cabin to wait in gloomy misery for day, but deadly wearied, unknowingly I sank into deep slumber, which lasted till heavy movements about the ship roused me. I hurried on deck, the morning was flushed with the rising sun, we sailed over a deep blue bay, and just ahead glistened the crystal city of Centur. Everybody was on deck to view the magnificent scene, but exchanged amused glances and smiled openly at my tardiness, while Alpha, radiant, buoyant with hope, greeted me with laughter and jest. Repose had not banished despondency; I chilled with dread and black forebodings. In all the travels, when constantly fearing the possible materializing of the "adored," I never experienced the positive hopelessness that now warned me of sure and bitter, bitter disappointment. Alpha Centauri would treasure the ideal forever. I was miserable, cruelly fated to worship a phantom which was fading from

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my life. I knew it. In an agony of wretchedness I caught her hand, holding it tight, and she—God!—laughed in her mirthful mood, taunting my gloomy countenance. The others joined in her sport, gayly encouraging me and quipped my depression; yet smile I could not. The dramatist declared I would make tragedy popular again, and the literary genius told me he would never regret our meeting, as I had colored the closing chapter of his forthcoming romance, which finale would crown him with immortality.

“You shall jest no longer at my Virgilius!” cried Alpha, leading me away, though laughing merrily.

It matters not what passed between us, she spoke seriously, and of the future.

“I am glad to return,” she murmured; “do not begrudge me the scant joy of expectancy. It is only on the surface. In my heart I fear—ah!—I cannot, I cannot envelop you with the sweet foolishness lavished upon the impossible, but you taught me to love—I belong to you—and—er—Virgilius, we may both be happy yet.”

God! I gasped, scarcely believing what I heard. My senses tingled, I seemed to choke. She gazed at me with wide open, tender eyes, and passionately I pressed her hand to my lips. She flushed at my ardor and turned aside. In mad adoration I caught her in my arms and crushed her to me. I cared not if the whole world spied upon us. I kissed my glorious Alpha upon the lips, eyes and sweetly flushed cheeks.

Snickering, smothered guffaws roused my

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drugged senses; protesting vigorously, yet good-naturedly, against my ardent caresses, Alpha freed herself, calling me a "wild boy, but lovable."

"And look," she cried, running to the ship's side; "look, Virgilius, we have reached Centur."

### CHAPTER XIX.

The ship gradually lowered as we floated over the city. The news flashed over Centur that the Priestess of the Sun had returned and excited crowds blackened the streets shouting a welcome.

Alpha leaned far over the ship's side, waving the flag of Centauri in response. Centur was in gay attire, gaudy flags and pennants floated from the domes of all buildings. Gorgeous silken banners coiled around the arms of Centauri and gently fluttered against huge arches and towers of rare blossoms whose rich fragrance absorbed the air. Something wonderful was certainly going on. Alpha turned to us bewildered.

"What is it?" she queried. "Our return was unheralded—it is not a fête day. How beautiful Centur looks!"

She shrugged her shoulders and again smiled down upon the welcoming people. The ship finally reached the palace park, then fluttered and circled downward and gently settled in its steel shed.

The crowd surged against the walls with deafening shouts of greeting. Alpha waved her arms,

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and her clarion voice rose high in the worshipful cry of Sol. Like an avalanche the response fell upon her, betraying the joy these people felt at seeing her again. How they loved this beautiful woman! And now, as I think of it, I believe it was she, glorious Alpha, whom they worshipped—not the Sun.

With sweet dignity she received the officials who hurried to meet her. Besangno, the great statesman who acted as chief executive during Centauri's absence, saluted deeply and welcomed her in eloquent phrases. She was told that official notice had been received that her travels were about terminating, but that her sudden return was a joyous surprise to the people of Centur.

"If my return is so unexpected what fête day is Centur celebrating?" she inquired.

"Centur wears gala attire in honor of our distinguished guest who has delighted the populace with his presence nearly a fortnight," Besangno informed her. "Benlial, of the Vespa Belt, waits the superb Alpha Centauri."

I was standing beside her, but instinctively drew away, repelled by her sudden icy demeanor. Once more I beheld the strange, enigmatical goddess, who had welcomed me upon my arrival to the city: Alpha Centauri, Priestess of the Sun, always.

Erect, to her full height, with cold, calm, haughty eyes, she regarded the gentleman before her. She raised her arm and placed it across her breast, and with stiff formality bowed.

"Greetings to the Vespa Prince," she said; "his

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return to his people shall not be delayed. I will receive Prince Benlial at once."

Besangno was not at all dismayed by her manner, she had always been gracious to him, but this was Alpha of the Centauris, Priestess of their deity; a perfect woman, passionless—a saint. The glowing, palpitating creature I created was not for public adoration—she was mine, mine always!

Besangno explained that the Prince was absent, gone to view the magnificent Otega, "but will speed back to Centur when informed that the Priestess of the Sun has returned."

"A ship passed us in the night," she told him, "gay with the nation's color, and freighted to the brim with merriment. Besangno, the morning is still early; before noon you will hear my order. Prince Benlial must not be disturbed in his pleasures."

Besangno bowed low. None dared approach her, and silently she disappeared within the palace whose portals were draped with the gaudy silken banners of the Vespas. I did not see her again till the evening. Besangno and his suite remained in respectful attitudes till she passed from view, then abruptly hurried away, and I was left with the little troupe of traveling companions who were palpably impatient to depart. A low whistle near me, and I turned and faced the Literary Man, who grasped my hand, telling me he could never repay the debt of inspiration I had roused within him.

"Your companionship lures success," he barked. I smiled acknowledgment, but the Tragedian re-

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lieved me from replying. He clung to my other hand and begged me to remain forever among them. "Never in my life," he assured me, "have I experienced the exquisite diversion enjoyed in your company. Your skill as a tragedian is genius, your interpretations famous. Ah, Virgillius, your amazing capabilities will force the public to comprehend the great tragedies that no Centaurian can act. The powerful masterpieces of morbid imaginations shall cease to be farces."

I listened attentively, not certain if they were making sport or meant it, but both seemed ridiculous and I laughed. The laugh was taken up heartily and both gentlemen simultaneously dropped my hands, each declaring gravely I was deep, deep as the fire geyser in the ice summit. Then one, throwing out his chest, cried: "Attention, friends! Will sensations ever cease? or is it the commencement of the end when the world will explode into millions of particles, as Thoralda the Great predicts. Listen: first, Virgillius and his friends drop among us from, no one knows where, to overpower us with their marvelous experiences. Then the Otega becomes active after six centuries of repose. And now comes this splendid savage, the Prince of Vespas, ruler of the land of hornets, whose swift progression dares them to defy even Sol. We are far in the rear of these wonderful people, they would elevate us by sending the most audacious hornet of them all—for what? To mate with the rarest and most perfect of Centaurians, Alpha, Priestess of the Sun, who can never mate. Jingle

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the cap and bells, friends, hail to the splendid, glorious Prince Benlial."

They applauded him noisily, and I tried to crush the sudden sick miserable feeling that came over me. They finally left me, even the crowd outside had dispersed, and I was left alone deep in gloom and hopelessness, assailed with a cowardly faintness of heart that made me at last realize why I had been a failure all my life.

I knew well the import of the Prince's visit, but it seemed preposterous this savage was to end my dream—he was only a man far from ideal.

Bah! absurd! I flung out my arms as though brushing my trouble from me. "Alpha Centauri, my own creation, mine forever," I cried.

Discreet footsteps, an apologetic cough sounded near, and I turned to face Mike, the ever-smiling Mike. He handed me a note and I read that Alpha Centauri had many important matters to attend to and could not see me till evening. She wished me to rest so my mind would be clear, refreshed, and able to give undivided attention to the many affairs she would consult with me. Mike bowed deeply and followed as I hurried to my apartments. He regaled me with the palace gossip.

I learned that Saunders had suddenly ended his connection with the Observatory and, with a party of scientists, had traveled throughout Centauri, returning only last evening, when he and the "great inventor" departed immediately for the Ocstas, both wildly anxious about their friend Sheldon, who they feared had perished. Saxlehner had com-

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pleted his marvelous machine, and he (Mike) presumed "all three" would again become guests at the palace. Then he told me of Prince Benlial, a magnificent specimen of manhood, who had enthralled the hearts of the people, and was enthusiastically cheered whenever he appeared upon the streets.

"He is searching for his affinity—ahem!" said Mike, "and has already traveled over half the world. He boldly declares he has come to court our beauteous Alpha, and vows the Priestess of the Sun shall be his bride. His bravery and frankness charmed all, even conquering Centauri, who placed the palace at the disposal of the handsome boy; but all pity him. It is really sad to think of the meeting between him and the wondrous Alpha, who, though the most perfect of women, can be infernally cruel. The Prince will depart in anger, and the unification of the white race will be delayed several centuries, though much desired both by the people and Centauri, else the Prince's reception would have been different and his stay among us brief. Like the savages, he adores all women and would throw the whole world in an uproar to obtain the one he desired. What an incomprehensible weakness! However, he is enjoying himself immensely among the gay youngsters of the city, and—luck to him! Luck to the pretty boy!"

Mike irritated me and I dismissed him; then wondering what I should do till evening began scribbling notes to Alpha, begging to be received.

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I was desperate; positive I must see her at once. She replied verbally: "Much important business to transact; please excuse," etc—.

I gave it up. Why trouble her? She did not care and could not understand. Selfish, cold-hearted, God! how cruel this beautiful woman could be. She was one of those imperfect creatures who never love, their whole nature dominated by Self, fitfully passionate, as unreliable as life—yet was she my own creation, mine!

I found myself pitying the Vespa Prince; after all he was only a man like myself, and I suffered; yes, I suffered.

I sauntered aimlessly through the gardens, then wandered around the city, loitering in the streets and parks watching children at play, and finally sought rest in the Salon, burdened with art treasures. I looked again upon the tranquil beauty of Abella, wife of the gifted fisherman. The face was so calm, placid, vacant, one wondered why humanity worried over trivial nothings. Life is brief, and we cram so much unhappiness into it. Why strive for what we can never accomplish? Why strive at all? Be content, accept destiny, no effort can alter it; crawl and crawl as does the worm: we are but another species.

Life is a mysterious, enchanting dream, the awakening—dissolution. There are very few souls among the millions inhabiting this sphere that have mastered the knowledge of living, the majority merely exist. Every man, woman and child should be drilled through the intricacies of nature, make

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them thorough in this powerful art—the art of living—then call their attention to the tedious verbs.

I smiled up into the beautiful, soulless eyes of Abella, tranquil, sublime beauty—you have calmed tumultuous thoughts. Adieu, sweet Abella, how your husband has marred your fairness. I blew a kiss to the delicate painting as I hurried away.

The long, slanting rays of the afternoon sun lengthened into dusk, and as I reached the palace the city flamed with lights. The stately quiet of the Centauri dwelling had vanished, all was activity, bustle. The doors of the throne room and vast salons were flung wide, decorators were at work. At the far end of the lofty vestibule, dimly seen amid crystal columns, was the banquet hall with long, massive tables laden with shimmering satin and glistening plate of gold and silver. Some great event was to take place and I hurried to my rooms to find Saxe., Sheldon and Saunders eagerly awaiting me.

We were powerfully glad to see each other. Though all were anxious to relate their experiences and adventures since last meeting, Sheldon was given the floor, owing to his late narrow escape through too much Otega. In excitable tones he described the progression of his work before the eruption ruined all.

“Boys,” he cried, “I was right about the whole matter and the scientific societies of the world be hanged! I discovered the source of that great body of fresh water—the Arctic ocean. It does not

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supply the earth as I originally contended, but it creates, feeds all streams, rivers, lakes for thousands of miles in that vicinity.

"The Centaurians have wonderful mining apparatuses. We mined those mountains for miles, tracing the flow of that water through the vast arteries of the earth. Springs were numerous, the water bubbling in tiny geysers, clear and sparkling. I proved my assertions and convinced the greatest man of this part of the world, Centauri himself. During his stay in the mountains I learned the secret of his greatness. Simple, unassuming, yet his wisdom is of such superiority and profundity he cannot impart it to others; sublime in his generosity and knowledge he listens to all. I never believed I could feel such reverence for any human being. He impresses every one the same way, hence, his greatness. As for the delegates of the two societies who accompanied me up the mountains I was perfectly aware what they stationed themselves there for; to settle their dispute, whether the volcano was extinct or not; and I'm damned glad they found out!

"Talk about the calmness and haughtiness of these people! Those men squabbled from morning till night and seriously hindered my work. They were constantly wiring statements to their different headquarters, and once the entire crew of both societies swooped down upon us, consuming several days in mass-meetings and idleness.

"Centauri told me the Otega was dormant, having found an outlet in some other portion of the

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globe, but the solid mass collected here and was a depot for further eruptions. He agrees with me that this body of fresh water is not the aftermath of the famous eruption of six centuries ago, the crater became the bed for one of the greatest freaks of nature, a gigantic artery burst, forming the oceanlet, which is simply a continuation of the Arctic.

"And, friends," ended Sheldon with a twinkle, "all who accompanied me came away with energy and fully satisfied."

He waved his hand toward Saunders, who grudgingly complimented him upon his successful discovery, but suggested that neither he nor Sheldon could become bombastic over their success, both were on a par.

"But," smiling around, "I toured Centauri and journeyed half way to the moon—ahem! Through miscalculation my work at the Observatory was only partially successful. I manufactured a set of lenses three degrees more powerful than those in use; my intention was to extend the power five degrees. The people over here are thorough in everything they undertake, but slow; for fifty years the astronomers have been planning a trip to the moon and arrangements were just completed when I arrived and was complimented with an invitation to join the expedition.

"The Centaurians are very progressive; they attempt to attain the impossible. We started upon our wonderful trip in an especially constructed flying machine loaded with instructions what we were

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to do when we got there, and the signals we were to send to the gaping boys down here. We traveled very rapidly, attaining a height never reached by balloon. We suffered, of course, hemorrhage attacked us in its most malignant forms, but we paid no heed to this weakness, believing in the scientific assurances that as we became accustomed to the rarified, ever-changing altitude, such annoyances would cease—and they did.

“In the meantime the higher we pierced this atmosphere the farther away the moon seemed, and our own globe had become a huge, glowing ball, throwing out a powerful radius of rosy light, tinting space a deep pink to seemingly unfathomable spheres. We had sailed far and above this roseate radiance when panic seized us, all had one unuttered thought, an intense desire to return to earth, but enough of the world remained in us to secrete cowardice. I, for one, lost courage entirely with the eccentric movements of the ship which suddenly zigzagged oddly, giving great bounds upward, then fell back a space and shot slantways across the sky; but for all of her queer antics she continually gained in height, and height apparently was all we concerned ourselves about.

“However, gradually everything ceased to interest us, a peculiar indifference embraced all, a deadly lassitude. We lolled around seeking rest, peace, to dream forever in blessed forgetfulness of existence, to sail always in the cool, blue depths of eternity. How long I remained in that strange tranquillity I shall never know, but suddenly shrieked with the

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terrible pain in my heart, a thousand tons seemed pressing upon my brain and vivid streaks of lightning pierced my sight. I was blinded, but danger roused me and I staggered, groping my way to the engine room. A heavy, inert form barred the passage, but I stumbled over it to the gigantic clock whose hands guided the ship.

An ominous roaring sound warned me of grave disaster; if we continued to travel upward the ship would explode. Ignorant how to regulate the ship's speed, I moved the upper hand of the clock downward, and down we shot like a rock, then I stared at the great hands hesitating what to do next when some one pushed me aside. A man, haggard, bleeding profusely from the mouth, deftly moved the hands of the clock and the ship slackened its crushing, downward course.

"Blessings upon your vitality," he whispered; "otherwise we would all be dead. We realize the nectar of existence when we feel it oozing from us. Life! Sol, give me life. Science! bah! nonsense!"

We revived as we approached our natural sphere, but it was an experience I shall never forget, and it cost the lives of two men, A noted professor and the engineer who died like a hero—much good it did him. He gave his life for science, believing himself the only one who succumbed. We took the professor and engineer to their homes, then toured Centauri, which consisted in dropping each member of the expedition to their city. When we dwindled to three, Centur was reached, and—er—here I am."

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Our congratulations seemed to make Saunders uneasy.

"You forget," he interrupted, "our trip to the moon was a failure, a second excursion will not be attempted for several centuries. Eventually they will succeed. Our journey to the moon has been suppressed. When we return to our own hemisphere I shall be sadly regretted by the scientists here, for all their marvelous advancement. I imparted much information and predicted this, their latest failure. Ahem! I haven't done bad, not bad at all; but not for a thousand lives would I journey to the moon again."

"Why didn't you visit the Vespa Belt instead?"

Saunders sniffed. "There was no choice offered," he replied; "but certainly I would have preferred the moon. The Vespa folks are way-back savages, I understand, and a broad expanse of wigwam does not inspire me."

He eyed me sharply when I told him he was wrong, all wrong; that the Belt was the most wonderful portion of this part of the globe. Then I described the art and originality of the people and the peculiarly beautiful mosaic palace of King Benlial. Saunders sniffed. He wasn't interested in the Vespas, and turned quickly to Saxe., who remarked that he was mighty glad we were all together again anyhow, because for some time, having no occupation, he'd been ripe for any mischief.

"The *Propellier* was completed weeks ago, and I've examined the machine they're going to present to us. It's a wonderful structure of crystal and

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steel, and covers a hundred and fifty miles an hour. The coaches attached are fitted up luxuriously. Our return trip will not be so hazardous and decidedly more comfortable; and we all have the supreme satisfaction of having discovered what we searched for.

"We found the Pole, and can prove of the wonderful cities beyond. I have mastered the marvelous secret of gold and diamonds, and now have the power to do my share in the vast endeavor to stamp out the evil passion that causes so much unhappiness —Greed. Sheldon discovered his great body of fresh water, and has some excellent photographs stored away that will make him famous. His homecoming will be glorious, he'll be given an ovation because he risked his life for science. He can prove the positive existence of the freak ocean. He will experience the rare and pleasurable sensation of ridiculing those who formerly ridiculed him, and that's going some."

Sheldon spruced up, Saxe.'s approval was exhilarating.

"And Saunders succeeded also," continued Saxe., "he discovered the famous pink star that all astronomers know of but failed to locate. He has some remarkable photographs and has written up a treatise on why the star is not visible from our point of view, and constructed a new map of the heavens. He'll return to his continent magnificently equipped with all the modern astronomical contrivances the Centaurians can supply him with, and can lecture at length of how he went the Cen-

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taurians better concerning powerful lens—whatever they are.

“During his homeward journey he will occupy the time writing a book of his trip to the moon. Really, I think we’ve all done first rate; couldn’t have done better. We accomplished what we set out to do. But, there’s Virgilius,” he looked over at me and shook his head reprovingly, “he’s simply our millionaire Salucci, the same as formerly. He’s gained knowledge, of course, but he won’t air it to the world. Yet, come to think of it, he’s been about as successful as any of us. He came in search of a woman—and found her.”

He smiled encouragingly at me and opined that mine was a mission more difficult than any.

“His was a fancy, mythical, intangible,” said Saxe. “A tantalizing dream, a hallucination, and the realization more marvelous than the imagination. Virgilius should be happy; he is the first man in creation that ever realized the ideal and made it his own. He has succeeded where all men fail.”

I sprang joyously to my feet, his words invigorated faint hope; but he hurried to me and anxiously grasped my shoulder.

“You return with us, Virgilius,” he said: “we cannot; nay, we dare not leave you with these strange people.”

“You make me mad with joy!” I cried. “I love! ah, how I love! but hopelessly, hopelessly.”

All smiled.

“Poor actor,” laughed Saxe.; “pretense too thin

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—sounds sweet and you want more. Hopeless? Fiddlesticks! you've won. Men always know when they're ahead. You're picked for the mate of the superb Alpha. (Sheldon and Saunders have bet ten to one on it.) She's been declared false to her vows, and is no longer Priestess of the Sun. Gossips whisper of your strange influence upon the fair Centaurian; your absence creates restlessness, distraction, and she seeks every opportunity to study you intently, absorbingly. Bah! just an ordinary case. You discover a handsome woman, innocent, with blank mind, which you proceed to fill with foolish fancies, and, true to her sex, wearying of myths and shadows, she welcomes stalwart, vigorous flesh and blood. It is nonsense that will prove a pleasant remembrance; it must not detain you among these people. Why, Virgilius, we cannot leave you! Heavens, boy! think, we dare not return without you! She will forget, they all do—by George! the women over here are more unreliable than those of our world, and—”

I shouted with happiness.

“A thousand worlds could not separate me from Centauri, if what you tell me is true,” I cried. “I will remain—give up everything—but it is too much happiness—you exaggerate—to-night I will know. Have you all forgotten the Vespa Prince?”

A pang quivered through me; my spirits ebbed as I mentioned the name, but my friends' laughter renewed courage and vanity—with a swoop doubts vanished. Thank Heaven! I had won. Alpha Centauri was mine; mine forever. I laughed joyously.

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Sheldon's sharp eyes twinkled as he twitted me of my love.

"The Vespa Prince!" he jeeringly remarked, "you overdo your little act. When one is beloved there are no rivals—you know it. The superb Alpha thinks, dreams of just one man—Virgilius. The Prince is the final act of a comedy, unnecessary, witless. He cares not a rap for the peerless Alpha. He was sent here to work as much mischief as possible, then come home again. The King is a vindictive old cuss, thinks his son invincible, and the fair Alpha showed scant courtesy to the old boy, and the Prince is full of ginger. The people here have jollied the young fellow along because he's a pretty boy, even old Centauri said he was a fine specimen. The remarkable change noted in the wondrous Alpha since your advent has roused universal discussion, and scientists aver she is gradually degenerating to the level of primeval womanhood. Virgilius, you seem foolishly timid, this mystical woman has fascinated you. You forget women have always been your—er—inspiration, and you have yet to meet defeat. You have loved before and many times as deeply as you do now; this affair is not more serious than the others. Lay aside passion for one cold little moment; think, my boy, calmly, soberly; do not be an ass.

"Powers above! why don't men cultivate more thought in such emergencies? At any rate one thing is certain, you return with us. You have to; friends would think we'd made away with you—we're all so handsomely provided for in your

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will. What a peck of trouble you're giving us anyhow!" he snapped, suddenly grown irritable; "you act like a pup!"

"Oh, let him remain and be damned!" bawled Saunders.

I gesticulated impatiently, trying to speak, but Saunders; crabbed, peppery little Saunders, would hear nothing. His voice squeaked high with temper.

"Let him remain, I say! Don't waste time over him. We're not going yet, so let him marry this wonderful creature, and I'll warrant he'll soon be in more haste to depart than we."

"Say, friends, let the boy alone," laughingly cried Saxe., coming to my rescue. "Let him enjoy all the happiness possible out of the affair. He and I will discuss later our departure. Virgilius was always a favorite of Folly. We'll talk this matter over again, meantime be merry."

I laughed happily, not heeding the chorus of caustic remarks hurled at me from Sheldon and Saunders. Nothing at that moment could dampen my ardor. I was wild, triumphant, and even attempted repartee, always a hazardous undertaking with my witty friends. We all became unusually gay, and Sheldon roared a giddy song, which was fortunately terminated by the entrance of Mike. He served us with light wines and viands, and regaled our curiosity concerning the vast preparations going on below. We learned though the Vespa boy had been in Centur over a fortnight Alpha Centauri's greeting would be his first official welcome.

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"Old Centauri returned with us last night," Sheldon told me. "The Prince was notified the Priestess of the Sun had returned and he wanted to accompany us back to the city, but was advised to remain and view the Otega, as possibly the queenly young woman would not give him an audience for several days. It is believed he will visit the Poto-lili and Octroonga camps, both chiefs having, on separate occasions, been guests of old Benlial; but I think the young fellow will slip the dusky ones in his anxiety to inspect the female Centauri. I'm positive he'll reach the city before midnight. We're included in the feast, eh, Mike?"

Mike nodded vigorously, and ordered his three assistants to work, then tackled me; and while the ordeal of rejuvenation was taking place I despatched a messenger to ascertain when it would be convenient for Alpha to receive me. Her reply was verbal, brief, and disappointing as usual. Plans had been changed, the Prince had not been expected to return to the city for several days, but now would arrive any moment. I would find her in the reception rooms—would I please hurry to her—. We hustled and were soon ready to descend.

Mike was disappointed with us; he thought the handsome costume of Centauri more suitable for the occasion, but we couldn't see it. He followed us dismally, we jarred his artistic nerves. Poor fellow!

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### CHAPTER XX.

The brilliant rainbow salon was crowded. Sweet, weird Centauri music accompanied the hum of voices, and the fragrance of rare, strange blossoms filled the air. My three comrades mingled with the people, and I hurried down the long vista of glistening columns and lights to where Alpha Centauri stood greeting her guests. God! how marvelously beautiful the woman was! In an instant I was beside her and tremblingly addressed her. Her great eyes flashed into mine, her smile scattered reason. I suppose I acted idiotic; it was natural; most men would. She laughed gently and, taking my arm, told me I was a "dear, foolish boy." There was affection in her voice, love in her eyes. The worshipped Ideal was deserted—she had discovered Man. I was victorious. The circle surrounding us thinned; people departed with smiling faces leaving us alone to whisper sweet nonsense. Happy? yes; too happy in a world of our own.

She was gloriously, ideally beautiful to-night, gorgeously garbed in a shimmering robe of chameleon tint lavishly studded with gems. Neck, shoulders, arms were literally concealed beneath flashing orders and ornaments, while the luxuriant midnight tresses rippled the length of her form, yet upon her head rested the little gold cap with raised border of forked gold, emblem of the Sun.

She still considered herself Priestess of the Sun

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and gloried in that dull bit of gold on her head, the only woman in the wide world crowned with the flaming emblem; yet if she wedded she would be forced to relinquish it, and even now it was whispered she had renounced her religion—for me. Fate timed, yet threw a glamour of confidence and security over my fool's paradise that the end would be more deadly cruel. Her hand rested lightly in mine.

“To-morrow,” she whispered, “come; I must see you alone, away from everybody, all to myself. We shall arrange for the future.”

“Alpha,” I murmured, but her attention was attracted from me and I forgot what I was going to say in the excitement that followed.

Her hand slipped from mine and she moved away, then stood erect in an attitude of expectancy. From the gardens came the sound of trumpets and cheers; again and again above the noise and tumult were borne the words: “Hoo-ray! hoo-ray! long live the Vespa Prince!”

The most intense excitement prevailed; the whole of Centur seemed in an uproar; those in the salon flocked to the vestibule and balconies, echoing the shouts from without; and through it all Alpha remained cool, stately, the only calm, collected being in all that assemblage.

Into the great hall rushed the hubbub, the air filled with crashing, deafening, joyful music. Laughter and song greeted the great man, and those collected to welcome him yelled, mad with enthusiasm.

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Alpha Centauri's eyes were riveted upon the main entrance. I stood close beside her, but was forgotten. A man entered, followed by a group of gay young sports. But the man! this one commanded the attention of all. Of gigantic physique he towered above all men, fair as a god, face fresh and rosy, with close-cropped golden curls.

Way was made for him, the guests forming in two obsequious lines. He strode forward, his gleaming, sultry eyes hurriedly scanning the faces of all, then they rested upon the lovely woman at my side. He threw up his arm and his eyes flashed wide with amazement, then over his face spread a smile of wild delight, and he halted, marveling at her loveliness.

A low exclamation made me turn, she was bending forward, hands tightly clasped, her sweet face white with emotion, and dilated eyes raised, enthralled by the burning, blue orbs fixed upon her.

"Sol! Sol!" she murmured; "Sol! Sol!"

She pressed her hand over her eyes and brow, and with the action her senses returned. With drooping eyes and lovely, flushed face, she advanced to meet this man who was born a conqueror.

He hastened to her and caught both her hands; she murmured something, and he sank to his knee pressing his lips upon the hard brilliants hemming her gown. She turned slightly, he sprang to his feet clutching her lovely bare arm and drew her close. He whispered eagerly, passionately, and Alpha gazed at him dazed, fascinated—she realized her ideal, she had met her affinity.

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He led her to the forest of strange, tropical plants, whose branches housed hundreds of drowsy songsters drugged with the sweet, pungent odors from the voluptuously undulating fountain. These two will wander in this paradise of love, his arms clasped about her, whispering words of adoration while she listens intoxicated, wildly, deliriously happy, in her earthly heaven.

I watched them pass down the moss-covered path till the thick foliage of strange spices hid them from view—then I realized.

Numb, chilled, I turned away, every thought swallowed in a great physical pain, a hand of iron clutched my heart and wrung it dry as a sponge. I had a vague idea of falling, not suddenly, but gradually, easily; of many people hurrying to me; then Saxe loomed above, and as in a dream, came the words: "Courage, courage, my boy; be a man. Help! help!" he shouted in tones that pierced my brain, then borne to me vividly, yet as though thousands of miles away: "Heavens! how the woman deceived us all!" and my last flickering thought before blank was she had deceived no one, least of all myself.

In the garden, full length upon the lawn, the sweet, cool air revived me, but not for an instant had I lost consciousness.

My friends were about me, anxious, grave; distinctly I heard Saxe mutter: "We must get out of this and quick. Can't have the boy carrying on this way."

I remained silent, rather comfortable than

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otherwise, dreamily wondering what the row was about ; then, like a flash, I knew and a dull, heavy, sickening feeling gripped my whole mind. To escape the hell's torment of memory I would have given life. Oblivion? yes ; if I could never have realized. Now, God! All the little tantalizing delights, the sweet doubts vanishing in happy possession I was so sure of—all was over. Who could have foreseen such an end? The very peculiarities of this woman forbade such a finale. Instead, all would have expected this stately, high-souled, devout creature to renounce mankind, remaining true to her deity, secluded, to bask forever in the warm rays of the fiery god she worshipped. Oh, if I could have remembered her always as the Priestess of the Sun! To have renounced the wonderful, mystical being I discovered! I mourned for the beautiful ideal shattered by the woman, though fashioned by a master's hand the delicate veneer revealed the commonplace at the first test —the idealist's mist blinds all eyes. And she had done as the whole world of women have ever done —surrendered at the first flash of a pair of handsome eyes and sensitive red lips.

Ah, Alpha! Alpha Centauri!

I mourn for the romance, bah! I have no passion for the woman. I rolled in the cool, green moisture, moaning aloud my misery. Some one attempted sympathy. I sprang up, pushing him aside.

“None of that,” I told them, roughly, “Saun-

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ders's prophecy has come true. I am anxious for departure, the sooner now the better."

I left them. How could they console me for the beautiful astral thing that had passed out of my soul. I was fond of them; yes, but—what a deadly disgust I felt for all things.

Sheldon followed me and drew my arm within his. He said nothing, but I understood his deep sympathy, far different from that usually extended by those who cruelly select the most inopportune moment for reminder, and all through distaste to witness suffering embarrassingly mouth stupid, meaningless warnings. My unhappiness caused Sheldon sincere pain. I held out for a second, haughty in my misery, then my head dropped to his shoulder as a choking sob escaped me.

He led me far away from the brilliant palace, blazing lights, and gay music, away from the maddening sound of laughter, far, far to the outskirts of the city; and Sheldon talked, talked, talked; evenly, monotonously, and vaguely I understood that in a marvelous cool and dispassionate manner he was telling me the romance of his life—all men have one and live. My own grief was too vividly fresh for me to follow him entirely, but Sheldon's sorrow was caused by the knowledge that the woman he adored had never been happy. His romance was ordinary and occurred when he was very young or it wouldn't have happened.

They had been separated by lack of funds and a scheming mother, and both learned all about it

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when it was too late. She had made a very good wife for the wrong man, and had been in her grave these twenty years. And with a deep sigh poor old Sheldon handed me an old-fashioned locket, and I gazed upon a girl with a round, fresh face, saucer eyes and ringlets. He loved as I, not the woman but the ideal, and had been true because he never possessed. He would mourn forever for this moon-faced chit, who if she were to confront the matured Sheldon of to-day would not rouse even interest.

We tramped the live-long night, returning to the palace when the sky flushed red with the rising sun.

Hilarity had deserted the palace, the stillness of wan fatigue reigned, and surrounding all was that stale, dissipated atmosphere, the aftermath of an orgie. The lights were still burning in the spacious salon, and the crystal floor was strewn with wilted flowers smothering and dying in their own sicken-sweet, poisonous odor.

The banquet tables flickered in gorgeous disarray, their rich scarfs stained with the wine that had flowed freely, the pungent odor mingled with that of stale fruit and dying flowers. I turned from it all with loathing, and Sheldon hurried me up to our apartments.

Saxe. and Saunders groaned with indigestion in their deep sleep of wine; our entrance did not disturb them. As though I were a child Sheldon prepared me for rest, then hovered at my side and talked, talked, and talked. My limbs stiff-

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ened with weariness, my brain ached and wandered, then finally—

### CHAPTER XXI.

Disappointment is destiny: the grim inevitable to climax every ambition and season the soul with reason. Disappointment spares this world of imbeciles. And I, for all my wealth, became a man afflicted with a grand disappointment, just a swirling atom in this planet of passion. The room was flooded with yellow sunlight; after all it was a good, cosy old world, and why was I complaining when, for the first time in my life, I realized just what I expected only spoiled the good effect by trying to tease myself into false security.

My three friends watched me slyly, though engaged in their usual discussion. Sheldon and Saunders had returned to their old disputes. Saxe. was trying to make peace, and once more did I feel the usual inclination to sic the two old boys on. I joined them and was soon drawn into the mêlée. Saxe. expostulated, and I discovered I could still laugh.

Mike's entrance ended the row. He informed me Alpha Centauri wished to see me at once. It occurred to me I was no longer at the beck and call of this woman who had killed the beautiful, the poetical in me, and I replied: "I would follow shortly." Mike stared and possibly fancied some

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disrespect to the superb Centaurian, and he could fancy what he damned please.

"We have arranged to depart in ten days," Saxe informed me; "couldn't possibly manage it sooner."

"And the world can explode in that time," muttered Sheldon.

"But it won't!" snapped Saxe. "We are starting a month earlier than expected. Has it occurred to you, boys, that lacking a few months the seven years of absence are nearly up? I think we will just about catch the last vessel. And now that we are really going the Centaurians want us to remain. They have warned me of all manner of dangers and emphasized the fact that owing to volcanic origin, etc., the ice regions are constantly changing form and that possibly we would encounter a vast frozen ocean whose waves were insurmountable ice mountains, where formerly were barren valleys and cliffs. I replied we were forced to overcome all obstacles as our return to our own country was imperative. They consider us a brave quartette. One man particularly regretted our hastened departure, as he is perfecting an instrument which would establish communication between the two hemispheres, and he wished to present one to me for experiment. He has promised me the plan; from descriptions I think it is all wrong; I can improve upon it; but it would be wonderful if we could communicate with these people from our side. They want us to remain among them the worst way, however, and urged with every argument, finally declaring our people

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had long ago given us up and no benefit ever came from resurrection."

"Nonsense, Saxe!" I bawled, "you're hinting to remain. If I'm obliged to go alone, I will get out of this cursed place and quick. I detest Centauri!"

"There, there," he answered soothingly; "I am more anxious to go than you; merely wished to test, and you're game. Guess the latest phase the Centaurians have taken regarding us—the Vespa Prince is responsible for it."

"Out with it," I laughed. "I'm going to worry him some before I go anyway."

"This wise Prince says we're not from any strange land; we're Vespas," Saxe. informed us. "He declares the earth is round—ahem!—and that the Vespa Belt and, incidentally Centauri, comprise the whole globe.

"He claims that only one horn of his famous crescent is visible, the other is the foundation of the great ice regions and extends beyond the Pole; the land there is the Vespa Belt. He's about as wise as some of the smarties on our side, who insist the whole world is explored when they've toured the five little continents. The Prince thinks it's just possible we may have come from the extended horn of his little old crescent, but doubts it, and thinks it's more likely we're merely four clever adventurers from one of the large cities of his dominion. Now what d'ye think of that, Salucci?"

"Four adventurous hornets!" roared Sheldon.

"Hornets, by George!" echoed Saunders.

I was astonished, but joined in the yells that fol-

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lowed an inelegant remark from Sheldon, who rarely missed an opportunity, and Saunders helped him out with the same kind of thing. I took my turn and the buffooned Vespa Prince was guyed unmercifully. The four strayed hornets were making an awful din when Mike marched in, silencing us with his gravity and dignity. He disapproved of our boisterousness and came to remind me I must see Alpha Centauri.

Sheldon had his fling at him also, and Saunders gave his snicker that exasperated all who heard it, and caused Saxe. to raise his hands as though the fun had gone far enough.

"I shall have to see her," I murmured nervously. "She sent for me over an hour ago. It will have to take place; it might as well be now."

"Not much!" cried Sheldon. "I would avoid it. What do you suppose she has to say? I bet ten to one, boys, I have the whole interview in a nutshell. Sally, reproachful—the left man always is, I wonder why—and she will whine and simper, and regret, and want him to hang around to see how happy she can be with the other fellow. Same old affair, same old woman, no scarcity of 'em—what did he come over here for?"

Saxe. glanced sternly and hushed him up.

"Go, my boy," he told me; "but cut it short; make it the last time; end everything now. Don't permit her to play with you further."

"She did not play with me," I interrupted; "As far as she is concerned everything was—"

"All right," he hurriedly replied; "then you

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played with her, which is the same thing. Be firm, make it the last meeting."

"Saxe., you don't understand," I explained; "when I joined the expedition, it was to seek a madly-adored ideal—I found a woman and still seek. The ideal has no rival; I am true, faithful to my creation. Alpha Centauri never was divine. Her beauty pales before the gorgeousness of my ideal. The love-lorn Virgilius is dead. It is the same old Salucci itching for a new sensation."

I followed Mike. He regarded me curiously. "Alpha Centauri is grieved at your delay," he remarked.

I shrugged my shoulders, astonished at my indifference, but sighed deeply as I saluted the exquisite creature reclining upon a skin-covered couch with a background of huge white blossoms whose heavy fragrance consumed the air. She arose, watching me doubtfully, hesitatingly. I hurried to her and caught her hands tightly; the witchery of her eyes was upon me.

"Alpha," I murmured.

"Yes," she replied. "I know, I know. Ah, if it had only been, Virgilius!"

I dropped her hands.

"Do not reproach me," she pleaded. "I love as you have taught me. I've learned the lesson well. The Image claims me in the form of the Vespa Prince. Benlial! ah, Benlial! brings immortality; I am for eternity the Alpha who united the white races. In less than a century the Vespa race is

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extinct, mentioned as history, submerged by the powerful Centauris. Fate mocks, linking me to a people whom formerly I ridiculed, scorned; yet I would not have it otherwise. I adore my Prince. Love brought immortality, yet I would renounce both if once again I could be the Alpha of Sol. I existed in a divine atmosphere, gazed upon with awe; I basked joyously in the glorious golden light of my spiritual grandeur. Priestess of the Sun has passed away forever—immortality is the reward for undying regret.

“*Virgilius, you have made me a woman, given me a conscience, a heart throbbing with exquisite passion, but in creating me you neglected Fate, yet you gave me life and I am yours.*”

I stared at her, this marvelous woman in her folly defied even Fate. Then I knelt before Alpha Centauri in reverence of her grand, almost divine nature.

“*I would be a monster to permit the sacrifice,*” I murmured. “*Do not mar the perfection of my creation. Be happy, joyous, bright as the golden rays of the god you worship. May you exist always in the brilliant dream of the present. In ten day I leave Centauri forever.*”

She drew in her breath sharply, then clung to me, alarmed.

“*We can never part,*” she whispered. “*Virgilius, I have been blind.*”

I did not question her near-sightedness, but gazed rapturously into the sorrowful eyes, then passionately kissed her lips. But I knew. God!

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I knew. She spoke without reason that was in the keeping of the Vespa Prince. But her love glances made me reckless. The moment absorbed me, I forgot Saxe., everybody, and had but one thought—possession. I crushed her to me, ranting madly in my passion, the sweet eyes drooped and the lovely face flushed beneath my ardor. Suddenly she stood erect, as though listening, then with a startled exclamation sprang from me—in that instant the whole universe seemed to come between us. Then I perceived Mike's ugly head thrust between the hangings at the entrance. Mike, unruffled, seeing all with sightless eyes.

Before he could speak a powerful white hand clutched and pushed him aside and the Vespa Prince strode into the room. He gave me a sharp, scrutinizing glance, then hurried to Alpha. And I, looking at him in the full light of day, marveled at his god-like strength and beauty. He was the substance, I the shadow. Physically, mentally, he was a force beyond me. Though I loved her deeply my ardor was mild compared with his amorous adoration. He loved her; yes, with a mad, crazy desire that destroyed all barriers. And she? Her eyes beamed upon him with wonder and delight. It was joy to her just to have him near her. He clasped her firm, white arm and bent close, whispering eagerly, then led her to the far end of the room. She was completely under his control and he exulted in his power. He was wildly enamoured, but he was master. I had been her slave; she pitied, regretted me; but the Vespa Prince was all the

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world to her. Absorbed in one another they had completely forgotten me and silently I departed.

Heavy gloom had apparently settled upon my three friends, but they brightened considerably at my return, especially when perceiving my calmness, and I accompanied them to view the instrument that was to speed us over the Pole again.

\* \* \*

During the final days we were lavishly feted. The Centaurians presented all manner of flattering inducements, and noted orators from all parts of the land came, argued, vainly tempting us to remain among them. They warned us that we had become acclimated, and like the Centaurians would perish when reaching a certain latitude. But we couldn't see it, and I was the most anxious to depart. I thought of my three guardians, Middleton & Co., of the sceptre-like power my wealth influenced, by eminence in my own world, and maybe it was not altogether my wealth Beauty desired. My life had been marred; Cynicism, the brilliant, cruel blossom of Gold, had blinded me from the cradle to the purity of nature. The Ideal never possessed, still charmed; far above the earthly she lured, ever fair and true—unattainable.

Alpha Centauri realized the image of my brain, but the living, tangible woman dispelled the charm and I awoke with a shock, yet rapturous that the Ideal still existed. And I knew once out of this cursed country, away from the strangely fascinating woman who bore its name, that even regret

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would cease and again would I be the free, careless Salucci, fleeing from one idea to another; fickle, but comfortable.

Centauri and I never met again in private. She always had a fond, regretful glance and lingering hand pressure, but did not seek to see me alone and I did not ask her. We had parted with a sweet embrace and I would leave her happy with her Prince and—immortality.

\* \* \*

The day finale arrived. At noon we sailed forever from this strange, glorious land. Already Centauri and its people seemed of the past and would soon become faint, formless, in the soothing haze of memory. Saxe. lost trace of me in the pleasures offered by those interested in his craft. Sheldon had been mobbed and captured by the Geological-Geographical societies, and Saunders had been at the Observatory for three days past. I was the guest of a fashionable coterie of gay, idle young dandies, who made my last week in their freakish, but beautiful, world one of revelry. They were to be my escort in the farewell march to the ship, and as mid-day approached clustered about me eagerly, intent, apparently, that I should not have an instant for reflection.

They flattered, cajoled, and with delicate innuendo made me aware of my immense popularity. Incidentally I discovered that I was the last of the quartette to remain in the palace, and casually my attention was directed to the great mass of people

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who, since day-break, had been swarming into the gardens and streets surrounding the palace, and who now sweltered and jostled impatiently in the intense noon heat.

I spied my two old literary friends forcing their way through the crowd, and eagerly beckoned, while my gay companions boisterously hailed them. They responded by immediately disappearing beneath the flame-glinting portico, and elbowed their way to my side. Both gentlemen bubbled with fun and witticism, and I learned that my "meteor-like visit had been mystically impressive"; also, that I was too light for tragedy, too deep for comedy; my forte lay in the enjoyment I could take in both. I was advised to never again attempt any character except myself, and both in chorus implored me to cut out romance altogether.

Of course I joined in the laughter, though hazy to the joke, and while raking my brains for an apt retort was unconscious of the mischief brewing. I was suddenly seized and hoisted high. In spite of my protests I was rushed to the vestibule and dumped into a throne of foliage and rainbow blossoms, then borne aloft upon the shoulders of these rascally exquisites of Centur, began a merry, triumphant march to the ship. People cheered me wildly all along the route, and I yelled myself hoarse, while ladies pelted me with blossoms, and though I flashed bold glances right and left my mind suddenly shifted from the gay, noisy scene, and I glanced despairingly in the direction of the palace sparkling in the noon sun. Alpha Centauri

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had not said farewell. Centauri! Centauri! The name rattled through my brain. I turned sick with longing, myth or woman, I craved to see her again. And so befogged my senses became between sweet, forlorn memories, and the tumult around me that as the sudden ear-splitting shriek of a whistle pierced the air I jumped and nearly fell from my toppling floral throne.

Pandemonium reigned as Saxe's great machine speeded into view, and he beamed and shouted, waving his cap at the cheering mob, while Sheldon and Saunders stood upon the platform yelling like Apaches. The engine slackened as it neared the ship, then rushed up the bridge, running the full length of the deck.

My three comrades appeared suspiciously flushed and anxious as I boarded the ship, and busied constantly about me till we cut from the steel shell and floated upward—foolish trio.

Friends pressed around us and many were the long hand-clasps and good wishes huskily expressed. I was thankful when the bell of warning sounded and all hurriedly departed. Then, amid wild cheers, the ship slowly rose, the loud whirring, flapping of sail wings almost drowned the "good luck" called up to us. Higher and still higher we floated, the vast throng below massed and wavered. I leaned dangerously over the railing yelling, frantically signaling to the people who could no longer see or hear me. Then the ship shifted to a slanting course, darting meteor-like over the deep blue bay of Centur. Rich, fertile

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valleys, undulating mountains, thread-like silvery streams, flashed, then faded in the blue speed-mist as a fabulous poppy scene; and far in the distance, glimmering mystically through the heliotrope pall that shielded her, was the phantom city of Centur, the white city of delicate fairy spires and domes, and tall, fantastic, glinting Sun Temples. Beautiful Centur.

The ship soared higher, piercing the swiftly driven wind clouds which enveloped us in a fleecy mist, obscuring forever the marvelous dreamland. A burning flood scorched my eyes, a sickening regret raked my heart; after all it was a fair, smiling, wondrous country, the Centaurians, friends. God in heaven! if I dared—if I dared—I would return, return at once! But Centauri had vanished for all time, and my only consolation was to sigh miserably, though cursing my weakness and gaze distractedly in the direction of the evanescent city; and this unhappiness, love-sickness, self-pity so engrossed me that I did not hear the soft, stealthy footsteps approaching. My arm was gently clasped, a form leaned lovingly against me while a low, tremulous voice murmured my name. Startled, incredulous, I turned quickly and met the glorious, fascinating eyes of Alpha Centauri.

“You did not forget!” I cried in delight.

“I can never forget, Virgilius,” she whispered, twining her arm in mine. “I shall accompany you as far north as it is deemed safe.”

Determined to see the last of us she had boarded the ship at dawn, long before the crowd collected.

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The Vespa Prince was aboard also, but clever old Centauri kept that Prince in tow, never letting him out of his sight, and for six whole days I had Alpha entirely to myself.

She was fond of me—very; but she had killed the ideal. The passionate adoration that had caused me such misery was dead. Still she was the one woman in all the world I had ever really loved, and fickle, light, I may be, I could never forget her. I thought my heart would break when parting, and to me it seemed a criminal fate that ordained our lives should be separated; but later I realized it was all for the best; the exalted passion she inspired had vanished, and only exaltation could make love a delight to me.

For Sheldon's benefit we took the route north over the Ocstas so he could view the magnificent ruins of his great body of fresh water.

The Otega was still in eruption. The earth around had dissolved like wax and half the range was leveled with the country; miles were buried beneath ashes and lava.

Seventy-five miles farther north we came upon the encampment of the Octrogonas and Potolilis. The ship lowered and we spent several hours with the two tribes who were still at war, and still hoped to extinguish each other. Potolili's beautiful daughter was still a prisoner, though Octrogonna had wedded her; and Potolili had lost the wife whom Octrogonna claimed as his sister. The Octrogonas openly declared she had been murdered, and the bitter feud waged savagely. Potolili fiercely de-

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clared he would extinguish his opponents. He ordered all prisoners slaughtered like cattle. Alpha shuddered. Potolili laughed cynically as he watched her, and said the world would become a moon before the supreme passion, Hate, became extinct. Both tribes loaded us with gifts, and each were sincere in wishing us luck. Potolili declared his race would in time travel beyond the Pole and join our people.

We bade the warring chiefs farewell; even the savages of this country had become dear to us.

As the atmosphere cleared, rarified to a penetrating distinctness, we could see hundreds of miles ahead. Centauri had passed from us forever; we were up in the snow regions, and far in the distance, like a gigantic shadow resting upon the vast whiteness, was the fearful, barren regions of the Pole, tipped by the violet, illusive, ice mountains that had led many an explorer to his death.

The Centaurians traveling with us suffered intensely from the cold and had become strangely silent and sad; all dreaded the finale.

Alpha's vivaciousness was gone, the sweet face paled before the biting blast of the north, the glorious eyes clouded and drooped with weariness, yet watched my every movement with intense wistfulness—our last parting was near.

The ship gradually sailed nearer the earth, then a few miles farther north the order was given to lower—the hour I dreaded had arrived. Alpha, breathing with difficulty, tremblingly clung to my arm. I caressed and tried to soothe her.

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Saxe., Sheldon and Saunders entered the *Propellier*. The Centaurians collected around the machine in sorrowful farewell. The ship softly plowed the snow, the bridge was lowered, and we cheered as Saxe. put the machine in motion and dashed out into the great white desert.

I strode forward with Alpha clinging to me; suddenly she flung her arms around me and laid her cheek against mine.

"Let them go," she murmured; "you must remain. Virgilius, we cannot part! Ah, do not leave me!"

"Why should he remain?" demanded a voice close beside us.

Alpha gasped, but continued to cling to me, and startled, we turned to find the Vespa Prince glaring at us with jealous eyes.

Beautiful Centauri laughed hysterically, pressing her hands over her eyes as though bewildered, then she clung to my shoulder, murmuring:

"Remain; do not heed him."

"Remain for what?" I whispered, caressing her hair.

"For love," she murmured; "for love—it is not too late."

The Prince moved restlessly.

"Be patient," I muttered; "you will have her always. I paved the way."

"Nonsense!" he retorted. "I could have taught her; so could any man who had the courage. She is not a saint, just a sweet, warm-hearted woman who grieves at your departure because you came

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near being mated. Alpha," he continued, roughly taking her from me, "look up, be brave, make your choice, there is yet time. If it is Virgilius I return to the Belt, content that you are happy. If I am the one, say farewell, and let Virgilius depart in peace."

She shook her head, then slowly raised her eyes to his compelling glance; he drew her to him, she sighed wearily and her head sank to his breast. He held out his hand and gripped mine in a parting shake.

Without a word I turned and ran off the ship, which floated upward ere my feet scarcely touched the snow. Centauri leaned dangerously over the railing, her long black hair floated on the icy breeze, but she was clasped securely in the arms of the Vespa Prince.

"Virgilius! Virgilius!" she called, stretching out her arms. "Come back; ah, Virgilius, come back to me!"

Higher rose the ship.

"Virgilius!" the name wafted from the clouds. I scarce could see the lovely face. Then something fell; a bright yellow object softly plowed the snow and my control deserted me as I raised the shining thing. It was the little golden cap she had always worn to keep secret the charm that none but she could see—a huge yellow stone that flashed fire. Alpha Centauri gave up her religion when I passed from her life. To me she had given the sacred emblem of the Sun.

She and the ship had sailed swiftly away for-

## **The Centaurians**

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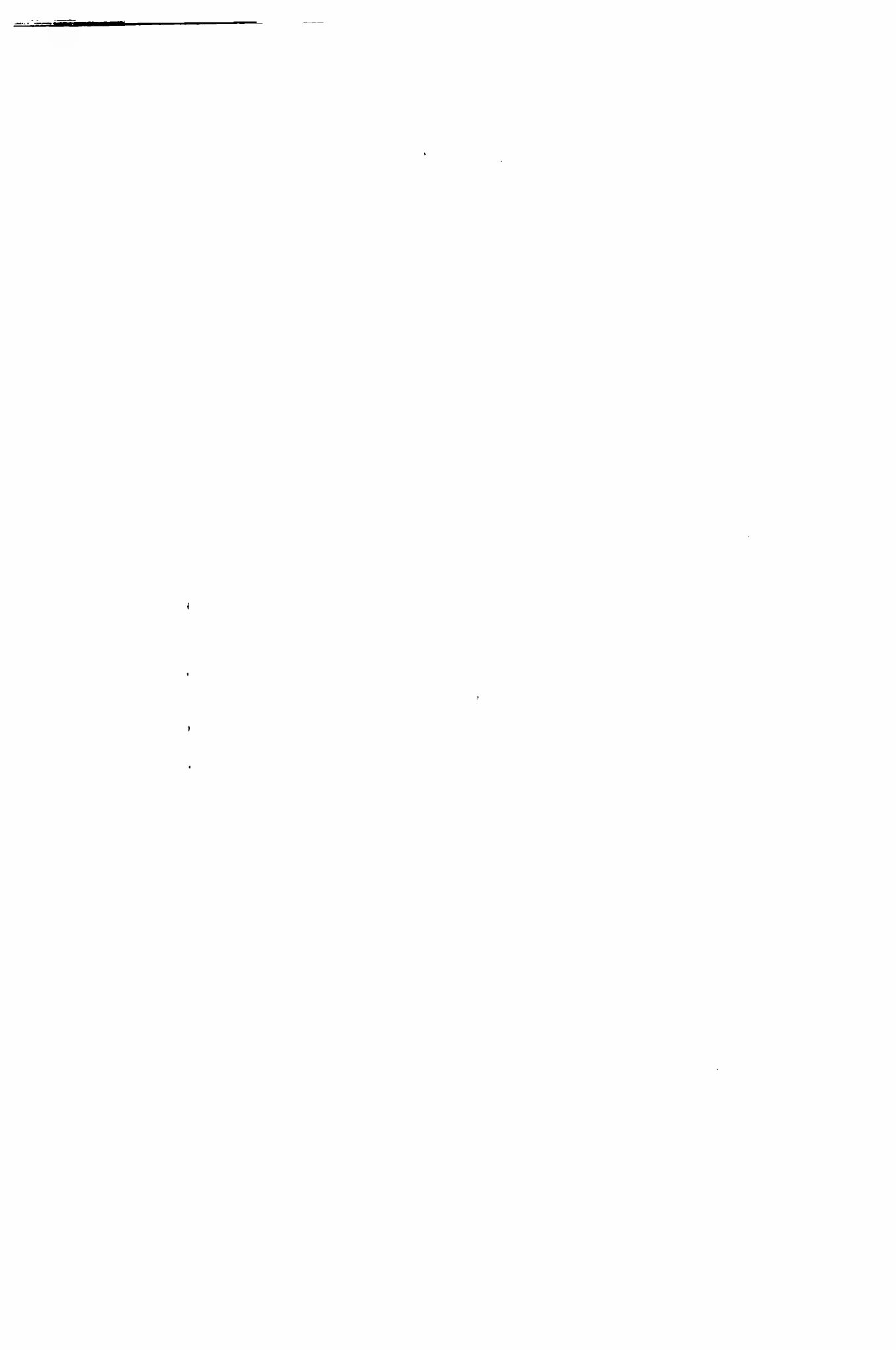
ever, and in despair I shrieked and ran, hoping, hopeless, if further there might be some trace in the sky. Nothing, all gloom and terrifying stillness —the one woman in all the world that I loved was sailing far above the clouds, consoled in the arms of her affinity.

This was fate.

And all that remained of this wonderful creature was a sweet remembrance and the little emblematic cap with its hidden treasure that only a Centauri dare possess.

**Centauri! Centauri! my beautiful—.**

**THE END.**















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